



**The influence of social media on organisational  
communication: A case study of the Public Relations  
Institute of Southern Africa**

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# **ABSTRACT**

The internet and the rapid development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has changed the way society interacts today. Social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, have brought a new era of communication to the world, thereby leading organisations to rethink their communication strategies. Social media are reshaping communication in organisations and incorporating social media into an organisations' communication strategy in today's fast-paced technological aeon has become essential for sustainability, success and survival. It offers organisations opportunities to communicate their messages to key stakeholders. It further enables public relations and communications practitioners to connect, share ideas and experiences, collaborate, engage in dialogue and build mutually beneficial relationships.

This study analysed the influence of social media on organisational communication using an interpretative, exploratory, qualitative research approach. The Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA) was used as the case study to understand the phenomenon. The study examined PRISA's social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) and explored affiliated practitioners' and employees' perceptions on the use of social media. Data was gathered through thematic content analysis (observation of Facebook and Twitter); semi-structured interviews for focus group discussions with PRISA employees and in-depth interviews with PRISA affiliated members. Participants were selected through non-probability purposive and convenience sampling.

Findings reveal that there is a poor level of engagement by PRISA on social media platforms. Participants maintained that PRISA needed to be more constant in their approach to social media and more engagement and connectedness is required to meet the needs of key publics. The data also showed that PRISA should invest time and resources in meeting the online needs of the new generation of practitioners. Participants expressed that PRISA has the capacity to be a 'conversation starter' and needed to promote discussion forums and digital communities. Findings also emphasised the significance of a social media policy and regular review and monitoring.

The study brings new perspectives on how social media can be incorporated into organisational communication strategies. Practical recommendations for public relations and communications organisations are provided based on the findings. Recommendations include building an online presence to enhance visibility; employing sustained and constant social media approaches; enabling social media discussion forums to facilitate dialogical communication; researching target audience to meet the needs of all stakeholders; enabling younger generation public relations practitioners to spearhead social media activity; appointing staff dedicated to social media management to improve efficiency; implementation of a social media policy; social media monitoring and review; and training and development of staff. This study serves as a knowledge base for public relations and communications organisations to understand the influence of social media on organisational communication. It offers a foundation for future research in the field of social media in organisations as well as offering practitioners, managers and organisations the capacity to make more informed decisions when developing and implementing their communications strategies.

# **DECLARATION**

I, Siyabonga Lawrence Mzizi, do hereby declare that the work presented in this dissertation is my own work. All sources used have been duly acknowledged and referenced.

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SL Mzizi

# **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother Deliwe Alice Mzizi and my late sister Mathapelo Wendy Tshabalala who lost the struggle against COVID-19; my best friend Xoliswa Ntombela and her wonderful family; and lastly to my Ancestors (Abo Jama Sjadu Sjelekwane) for enabling me to be their wildest dream.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

APR	Accredited Public Relations
APRA	African Public Relations Association
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CCM	Council for Communication Management
GA	Global Alliance
ICT	Information Communication Technology
PRISA	Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa
PRP	Public Relations Practitioner
UGT	Uses and Gratification Theory
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority

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# **CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT**

## **1.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

Modern digital technology is constantly and rapidly changing in this technologically driven era. The introduction of the internet and social media such as Facebook and Twitter have created new ways to connect and communicate. Organisations today have little or no choice but to adapt to the new forms of communication. Social media has grown to be an essential part of society, thereby compelling organisations to include it in their communication strategies. Research has shown that most organisations have applied one or more social media platforms to organisational communication (Bughin and Chui 2010; Irbo and Mohammed 2020). Incorporating social media into an organisations' communication strategy in today's fast-paced technological aeon has become essential for growth, sustainability and success. It offers organisations opportunities to communicate their messages to key stakeholders.

Over the past ten years, social media has become a promising channel of communication for both organisations and society at large. Organisations have taken the initiative to create online presence to foster two-way communication with their target audience. Mainstream social media provides organisations with the benefit of creating spontaneous, real-life conversations with their stakeholders, therefore creating a shift from one-way mass communication to a two-way "immediate" and "spontaneous" mass communication. The constant monitoring and management of social media platforms provides organisations with the ability to attract more customers, create brand and product awareness, a platform to address issues and crisis (issue and crisis management), formulate and sustain relationships, as well as foster engagement. Although social media has become an increasing area of interest for researchers, scientific research on this area is scarce. Research indicates that social media is wildly utilised as a tool to foster organisational communication. As a result, organisations have to focus on the development and implementation of social media policies and strategies (Naeem 2020; Pogorechvich 2020). Liu, Xu and Tsai (2020) further elaborate that the shift towards digital communication has been viewed by researchers as an effective way

to promote or practice organisational public relations. Even though research in the field of social media has been investigated and researched, there remains a gap in research that addresses the impact of digital media on organisational communication.

“Technological innovation has grown at an unprecedented rate over the past couple of decades, especially in terms of online social media platforms” (Duffett 2015: 499). Social media platforms include social networking sites such as Facebook, micro-blogging sites - Twitter and Tumblr; video-sharing – YouTube; instant messaging such as WeChat and WhatsApp; picture sharing - Instagram, Flickr and Pinterest; and business networking sites like LinkedIn. Social media networks have proved to be relatively cost effective and, often do not require subscription. Social media has gained significance in society today and platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have contributed to a shift in communication and how information is consumed and created in organisations. This technological development has led to the growth and change in the practice of public relations within organisations. Although public relations involve building relationships with stakeholders and practitioners, the changing dynamics of the public sphere requires stakeholders to engage their publics in conversation and create and sustain organisational relationships. The growth and speed of social media has “rendered public relations a constant dialogue between an organisation and its audience” (Evans, Twomey and Talan 2011: 1).

Several international academic studies explored the use of social media due to its versatility as it presents several advantages and disadvantages to organisations and these can be used to formulate communication strategies that are favourable to the organisation and its stakeholders (Pace, Buzzanca and Fratocchi 2016; Hunjet, Susec and Kozina 2017; Xie 2018; Tsimonis Dimitriadis and Omar 2019; Irbo and Mohammed 2020). This study seeks to investigate the influence of social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter on organisational communication, with the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA) as the case study. The study aims to analyse PRISA’s Facebook and Twitter page, and PRISA employees’ and affiliated practitioners’ perception on the impact of social media. The study aims to demonstrate understanding of the importance of social media and to examine how organisations can use social media to improve their communication with stakeholders. The stakeholders in

this study are the public relations and communication practitioners affiliated with PRISA. They are working for other public relations and communications organisations, sponsors, independently, higher education sectors and potential investors.

PRISA is registered as a section 21 company, governed by the company's Act, representing public relations practitioners in the Southern African region (PRISA 2021). The role of PRISA is to drive professionalism among public relations and communication practitioners. PRISA provides continuous professional development (CPD) for registered practitioners and students. This study focuses on the influence of social media on organisational communication and how PRISA employees use social media to effectively communicate with stakeholders and PRISA registered public relations practitioners' perception of social media's influence on organisational communication.

An example of the impact of social media on organisational communication and society is the current COVID-19 global pandemic. The pandemic impacted the global economy and affected majority of business sectors. COVID-19 has presented the world with substantial challenges that affect the well-being of people and organisations. During the early stages of the pandemic, people across the world were uncertain of what the virus meant, how it spreads and how to prevent it, and society turned to media for answers. Subsequently, mainstream media as well as social media were the major source of information for people. Social media has the power to distribute information at a fast pace and during the COVID-19 period, many organisations realised the important role of social media and began to make use of social media platforms to communicate with stakeholders internally and externally.

Furthermore, in higher education, social media has been used to augment the process of teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Namaziandost and Nasri 2019; Al-Shammari 2020). During the pandemic, many organisations including big business, universities and schools were locked down because of the World Health Organisation's (WHO) call for social distancing to curb the spread of the virus. This led to organisations embracing online platforms including social media to keep communication open with stakeholders and for their continued operations and

development. The use of social media during COVID-19 highlights the role of social media, particularly during crises and how through social media, organisations can engage in communication strategies to cope with challenging situations and facilitate effective communication.

This research is set within a merged theoretical framework that draws on the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) and Systems Theory Approach. Karimi, Khodabandelou, Ehsani, and Ahmed (2014: 54) states that one of the successful theoretical frameworks used to examine “how” and “why” individuals use the media to satisfy their particular needs is the UGT. Katz, Blumer and Gurevitch (1974: 19-34) indicate that the focus of UGT is on what people and organisations do with the media. They debate that the audience are actively selecting and using the media in response to specific needs. The theory therefore is used to examine the gratifications obtained by PRISA affiliated members and employees as a result of using social media in their organisations. The UGT has its roots in communications literature and can be an important part of developing better measurement instruments for social media markets. Therefore, this research seeks to apply UGT to highlight the importance of social media in organisational communication. Karimi *et al.* (2014: 54) debate that researchers are also using UGT to provide a deeper explanation of why social media networks have become increasingly interesting and attractive to users, what motivated the audience to join the social networking sites and the gratification received by ongoing use. The theory will provide a necessary framework in the research study to enhance an understanding of PRISA’s need to leverage social media platforms.

The Systems Theory Approach is also used to provide understanding on how PRISA functions as an open system. Mangal (2013: 118) affirms that all online websites and forms of social media networks are systems. A system is based on the metaphor of the organisation as a biological organism, therefore the organisation is an open system that has an interaction with the environment in which she exists. PRISA functions as an open system and this study is significant in that it will offer an understanding on how PRISA has adapted to the environment in this technologically driven era.

The researcher adopted a qualitative research methodology to assess employees' and PRISA registered public relations practitioners' perception on the use of social media in organisational communication. Data was gathered through thematic content analysis (observation of Facebook and Twitter); semi-structured interviews for the focus group discussion with PRISA employees and in-depth interviews with PRISA affiliated members. The study is descriptive in nature using an interpretivist paradigm and an exploratory research approach.

As earlier stated, this study aims to understand how social media may improve organisational communication by assessing opportunities, threats, and weaknesses relating to organisations' use of social media. It will further offer insights to organisations on navigating the fast-paced and changing social media landscape and improving and maintaining social media functions strategically within their organisations.

## **1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Social media is a critical area of interest for communications and public relations practitioners as it influences how organisations obtain, exchange and share ideas. Social media has become a core of society's communication cycle and impacts how organisations communicate with their internal and external publics. In today's era of social media communication, organisations face new challenges, as the participatory modes of communication shared by social media require a high level of responsiveness. Public relations and communication practitioners are responsible for being responsive to stakeholders' needs in an organisation. Therefore, due to the rapid increase in the use of social media in organisations, public relations practitioners need to incorporate social media in their integrated organisational strategies (Badea 2014; Kjaerulff 2015; Irbo and Mohammed 2020).

Social media are platforms where content is no longer created and controlled by gatekeepers, but they enable users to create content, publish, modify and collaborate. Social media differs from traditional media such as newspapers, facilitating dialogical communication (Argyris and Monu 2015). Social media has brought about a revolution

in participatory communication and has created online communities. Badea (2014: 1) further explains that organisations need to develop new approaches for organisational communication due to rapidly evolving social media. Despite the threats that social media can bring to organisations, there are many benefits. Social media promotes social interaction among the organisation's stakeholders and with the organisation. Therefore, the spontaneous two-way mass communication medium has brought about a new way of communication which is more effective compared to traditional mass communication which is one-way (Cao, Guo, Vogel and Zhang 2016; Tsimonis Dimitriadis and Omar 2019; Irbo and Mohammed 2020; Naeem 2020).

In addition, research into social media such as Facebook and Twitter are still in its infancy in a developing country such as South Africa. Majority of studies on social media and organisational communication have been conducted in advanced economies that have efficient infrastructure for ICT. It is therefore imperative for organisations, particularly PRISA to understand the influence of social media in their communication strategies and the integral part in organisations' survival in this global recessionary epoch. This research aims to provide insight into social media use to communicate with external stakeholders and assess the impact of social media on organisational communication. It provides an understanding of PRISA employees' and stakeholders' perception of the use of social media.

### **1.3 RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY**

Social media has become an indispensable part of life in the modern-day era. Today social media influences how people communicate. Advancements in ICT has brought forward a new way of communication that has become almost impossible for organisations to ignore. Social media provides a platform for a discourse surrounding the creation of spontaneous, participatory communication between an organisation and its stakeholders. Social media has in recent years become an imperative conduit for organisations to communicate with their key stakeholders.

However, despite the global social media revolution, not all public relations and communications practitioners use social media or observe it to its fullest, regardless of

the advantages it may offer (Skinner, Von Esselen, Mersham and Motau 2016; Inya 2017; Kim and Scott 2019). This is particularly the case in South Africa, and these are gaps that need to be addressed. Adequate resources and training should be provided to employees to develop their understanding of the uses and benefit and build their confidence in engaging in the online environment. Public relations practitioners have an important role in propelling organisations to improved levels of connectedness, productivity and sustainability.

The researcher's motivation for the study is that there are limited studies conducted in developing countries such as South Africa that focus specifically on social media uses and benefits to organisational communication. There are a number of recent studies that assessed social media influence however, these were predominantly conducted in developed nations, and few explored the way in which developing countries organisations could use social media to improve organisational communication. Based on this assertion, this research responds to these shortfalls in the literature and aims to offer insight to public relations practitioners, managers and organisations on how to navigate through the fast-paced landscape of social media and to improve and maintain social media functions strategically within their organisations.

Over the years social media has become the dominant source of information regarding social norms and presents users with new forms of communication platforms. The invention and growth of social media has an impact on every aspect of professional and social life, and it is therefore imperative for public relations and communications practitioners to understand ways to best utilise social media in their communication strategies (Cohen and Blaszczynski 2015; Davis 2018; Ju and Jia 2019; Tsimonis Dimitriadis and Omar 2019; Irbo and Mohammed 2020). Social media platforms can be used as a vehicle to build an organisations online profile and reputation, engage its publics in discussion on current issues affecting society and the industry, enable sharing of experiences and ideas, create opportunities for networking, all of which contribute to the development and professionalisation of the practice. The value of communication on social media such as Facebook and Twitter are therefore of significant interest to organisations, managers, communications and public relations practitioners, researchers and academics. As a leading public relations and communication organisation PRISA

needs to spearhead social media engagement which can contribute to knowledge building in the field. Therefore, this study aims to explore how social media can improve and maintain effective organisational communication.

#### **1.4 AIM OF THE STUDY**

This study seeks to investigate the influence of social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter on organisational communication, with the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA) as the case study. The study explores the influence of social media on organisational communication by examining PRISA's internal and external publics' perception of the impact of social media. The study also aims to demonstrate understanding of the importance of social media and to investigate how public relations practitioners can use social media to better and or advance their communication with external publics. The external stakeholders in this study are PRISA affiliated Public Relations Practitioners (PRPs).

#### **1.5 THE OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

- 1) To explore how PRISA uses social media to communicate with registered public relations practitioners.
- 2) To assess how PRISA has adapted to the use of social media in its organisational communication strategy.
- 3) To analyse the employees' and PRISA registered public relations practitioners' perception of social media's influence on organisational communication.
- 4) To offer an understanding of how social media can improve and maintain effective organisational communication.

#### **1.6 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS**

##### **Chapter 1 – Introduction and context**

This chapter provided the introduction and background to the study. It further provided a rationale for the research. It outlined the research problem, research objectives and structure of the research.

## **Chapter 2 - Literature review**

This chapter provides a theoretical framework for the study. It also discusses the impact of social media on organisational communication. The chapter defines the concept of communication, focusing on organisational communication and the impact of social media on organisations. It further explores the roles and functions of public relations in organisations and provides an overview of the case study. The chapter discusses organisational communication and the rise of social media in organisational communication. The Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) is applied to understand why users take advantage of social media. Also underpinning the theoretical framework is the System Theory Approach that foregrounds the value of open systems approach in embracing a dialogic, mutually interactive and beneficial relationship between the organisation and its publics.

## **Chapter 3 - Research methodology**

This chapter outlines the research design and methodology used for this study. It further explains the data collection methods and the research instruments selected to conduct the study. The researcher adopted a qualitative research methodology with a case study approach to effectively analyse the phenomenon within its context. Consequently, this study will examine and provide an analysis of PRISA's Facebook and twitter platform; the perceptions of social media by public relations and communication practitioners who are affiliated to PRISA; and employees of PRISA. The data analysis techniques adopted will be discussed and the concept of reliability and validity in relation to this study will be addressed.

## **Chapter 4 - Data analysis and interpretation of findings**

This chapter presents and discusses the findings from the social media observation, interviews and focus group discussion. The first section will consist of the preliminary biographical information from the participants and an overview of PRISA's Facebook and Twitter pages. The second section will present a more in-depth analysis in the form of themes that emerged from the data set.

## **Chapter 5 - Conclusions and recommendations**

This chapter summarises the findings of the study and presents recommendations to practitioners, managers and organisations on how to effectively incorporate social media in their integrated organisational communication strategies.

### **1.7 CONCLUSION**

This chapter presented the motivation for conducting this study, and the significance of exploring and understanding the influence of social media on organisational communication. It also introduced a brief discussion on the context of the study and the aims and objectives. The researcher further provided an outline of all the chapters. The next chapter presents an analysis of selected literature on social media and organisational communication and provides the theoretical framework for the research.

# **CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW**

## **2.1. Introduction**

The previous chapter provided an introduction and background to the study. This chapter reviews selected literature on social media and organisational communication and provides a theoretical framework for the study. It will define communication, focusing on organisational communication and the impact of social media on organisations. It further explores the roles and functions of public relations in organisations and an overview of the case study - the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA). The aim is to learn about the social media phenomenon within context. This chapter further demonstrates the significance and value of the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) and System Theory Approach to social media research.

## **2.2 Conceptualising communication**

It is important to explore the concept of communication in this study as it relates to one of a public relations practitioner's (PRP) primary responsibilities. Communication occurs when information is transferred between individuals, groups, and organisations, to bring forth an understandable reaction. It is essential to understand that communication keeps organisations together and can contribute to an organisation's effective and efficient functioning and survival. Communication is the process of transmitting and receiving information. In the communication process, exchanging ideas, feelings, experiences and attitudes is essential for creating meaning to produce a favourable response. Communication is, therefore, any means where thoughts are transferred from one communicator to the next to create meaning and understanding to satisfy a need or achieve a specific goal. Communication management is thus an important aspect for effective communication that occurs in organisations (Slater, Peter and Valkenburg 2015; Shonubi and Akintaro 2016).

Daily interaction between people is an important part of human survival. Furthermore, communication is regarded as the glue that binds communities together and humans

communicate to satisfy different kinds of needs (Barker and Angelopulo 2006). The concept of communication entails all forms of human communication and for something to be achieved, communication needs to take place among people effectively. Human relations rely heavily on the effective communication, and it becomes increasingly challenging for organisations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to survive and remain sustainable without effective communication. Communication is therefore essential for the existence and survival of an organisation.

Recently, organisations have taken advantage of social medias' ability to share instant and spontaneous communication with external stakeholders. Skinner, Von Essen, Mersham and Motau (2016) stress that social medias' ability to form instant interpersonal communication has progressed over the past decade making it an exciting and popular topic to scholars. Based on this, and the adoption of social media to communicate in organisations, this study analyses the influence of social media on organisational communication at PRISA.

The communication process involves two or more people who construct and exchange meaning. Communication is the dynamic, functional and transactional process that enables participants in the communication process to create and share meaningful messages and the process of communication involves the exchanging of signs and symbols to achieve shared understanding (Skinner, Von Essen, Mersham and Motau 2016). An organisation's management should plan, lead, organise, and control initiatives and ensure effective communication occurs with their employees and other stakeholders. There should be a common understanding from all parties involved in the communication process (Nel 2012, Fielding and Du-Plooy-Cilliers 2014; Skinner, Von Essen, Mersham and Motau, 2016; Xie 2018).

The rapid development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have made communication a critical area of focus in organisations. Furthermore, organisations need to ensure seamless communication between various departments to achieve the organisation's objectives. In addition, employees need to be motivated and work well with each other and in turn communicate proficiently with stakeholders. This is achieved by the PRP's who serve as the intercessor or intermediary between the

organisation and the stakeholders by establishing effective communication channels and implementing activities that are directed at building a mutual and beneficial relationship between the parties (Bossio, McCosker, Milne, Golding and Albarrán-Torres 2020). PRPs ensure that the different departments of an organisation work together to communicate effectively. Organisations have diverse departments that rely on effective communication to achieve goals and objectives. The messages must reach the relevant departments on time and through the correct channel. It is the responsibility of the PRP in an organisation to ensure that communication is facilitated smoothly, internally and externally. This study analyses the influence of social media on organisational communication at PRISA with a critical objective of understanding employees' and affiliated PRPs' perception on the impact that social media has on organisational communication. This is achieved through social media observation, interviews and focus group discussion.

### **2.3 Organisational communication**

Organisational communication focuses on exchanging information and creating messages between the organisation and its stakeholders. Organisational communication covers a wide range of avenues, such as formal and informal communication between the different stakeholders within the organisation. As discussed in section 2.2 effective communication is at the centre of all organisations. Therefore, for productivity, management needs to properly plan and implement a communication strategy. During the planning and implementation of the communication strategy, it is important for management to note that organisational communication is concerned with the symbolic use of language and how organisations operate to achieve their objectives effectively.

Social media has influenced how organisations plan and implement their communication strategies. Many researchers have affirmed that it has become almost impossible for organisations to ignore social media regarding internal and external communication (Welch and Jackson 2007; Fielding and Du-Plooy-Cilliers 2014; Inya 2017). Thus, this study discusses the rise of social media use in organisations in more detail in section 2.5.1.

Communication between individuals and groups that occurs in organisations is regarded as organisational communication. Organisational communication is the way organisations coordinate activities, accomplish tasks and build relationships with key stakeholders. It is integral for organisations to inform their stakeholders on general matters that affect their role (Dimitrijevska-Markoski 2018). This kind of communication is directed at providing support, enhancing performance, and increasing productivity. The flow of communication in an organisation can either be formal or informal, internal or external, horizontal, downwards or upwards (Barker and Angelopulo 2006; Welch and Jackson 2007).

Organisations are increasingly required to differentiate themselves from their competitors and therefore need to ensure that they are recognisable amongst the many brands that exist. To achieve a favourable standing with stakeholders, organisations need to attain an exclusive presence through various connections with their stakeholders. The use of social media by organisations with the aim to create a fair, competitive advantage through instant and intimate communication with stakeholders is one of them (Alizadeh, Moshabaki, Hoseini and Naiej 2014; Badea 2014). Social media are a group of internet-based applications classified under Web 2.0 and enable users to create online accounts, create a presence and interact with each other. Social media as a communication platform will be discussed in more detail in section 2.5.

The philosophy of organisational communication dates to the 1920s, where “businesses and individuals engaged in organised forms of communication to include public speaking at town hall meetings and legislative gatherings” (Wilkins 2010: 10). It is essential to assess the role that communication plays and its position in organisations. Management, therefore, should consider all the aspects regarding the role and influence of communication in their organisation. Organisational communication further relates to organisational behaviour and the symbolic use of language to achieve the objectives set by management. The discipline of organisational communication focuses on creating effective communication processes for the organisation that effectively deliver messages to the internal and external stakeholders. Communication managers need to understand the communication process to determine factors that will assist in creating effective communication. The sender in the communication process needs to be clear of

what he or she is communicating, and the planning of the communication should be transparent. Communication managers need to take into consideration the context and consult with all relevant stakeholders that are to be affected by the communication. Communication practitioners should aim to achieve participation in their planned communication. The communicators of the message should keep in mind that communication is more than just transmitting information but deals with the emotions and experiences that are as equally important when trying to build continuous relationships with stakeholders (Thomas and Dittman 2016). In this study, the researcher explores how PRISA uses social media to communicate with registered practitioners and assesses how PRISA has adapted to the use of social media in its organisational communication strategy.

Effective organisational communication relies heavily on communication channels that organisations employ in their communication strategies. The perception of the communication channels used by the organisations' employees and stakeholders plays a role in how the message is delivered and effectively received. Organisational communication is an integral part of organisations such as PRISA, where their core function is to promote professional and ethical engagement, as explained in Chapter 1. In any organisation, employees communicate formally and informally to achieve the objectives set by management. However, employees need to be motivated through continuous two-way communication. When employees are equipped with adequate interpersonal communication skills, they will effectively implement the organisational communication strategy.

Subsequently, the lack of communication in an organisation leads to dissatisfaction of employees in their roles. Poor communication is noted as the primary driver of negative feelings and low morale among employees in an organisation. Management needs to ensure continuous communication for the organisation to build a good image among its internal and external stakeholders. Organisations that constantly communicate with their employees benefit from high productivity resulting from satisfied employees. Organisational communication refers to the fact that everyone receives and sends signals in a given organisation and simultaneously coordinates tasks to respond to those signals.

Communication management is the systematic process where organisations plan their communication, implement their strategy, monitor its effectiveness, and evaluate its impact. Communication is not just a situation of face-to-face interactions but deals with different levels of effective communication and it is often the responsibility of PRPs or communication practitioners in organisations (Thomas and Dittman 2016).

The following section explores the role of public relations in organisations, particularly in terms of the use of social media for effective organisational communications.

## **2.4 The roles and functions of public relations in organisations**

For this study, it is important to understand public relations as a profession and the professions basic principles. Public relations is a complex social phenomenon and is often regarded as a communication process focusing on fostering relationships, maintaining an organisation's image, minimising threat to reputation, managing crisis and sustaining organisational survival (Claeys and Cauberghe 2012; Theunissen and Noordin 2012; Reitz 2012; Clear, Koonin and Pritchard 2015). Public relations is the "deliberate, sustained effort to establish a mutual understanding between the organisation and its public" (Wilcox and Cameron 2009: 6; Skinner, Von Essen, Mersham and Motau 2016). The field of public relations requires multidisciplinary applications to achieve the goals and objectives set. PRPs must ensure that issues are managed, thereby avoiding problems becoming crises.

Public relations play an important role in the organisation's communication and promotional strategy. Public relations is also described by researchers as a deliberate and sustained effort that is directed at creating sustained relationships with the organisations internal and external stakeholders. As a result of public relations, organisations are able to achieve brand loyalty and reap the benefits of continuous association from stakeholders. Through public relations main function, which is communication, organisations are able to communicate messages to stakeholders using a number of channels. The continuous development of the digital media presents organisations with countless platforms for communication without face-to-face interaction at an affordable cost compared to traditional media. These platforms enable

organisations to provide stakeholders with useful information and ease of use. Social media platforms therefore play a key role in attracting, segmenting and influencing the behaviour and perception of the organisation's stakeholders. Social media appears to be more influential compared to traditional mass media used for marketing communication techniques (Voorveld 2019; Ibrahim, Aljarah and Ababneh 2020; Aydin 2020).

In addition, public relations is a manner in which organisations attempt to apply influence over the symbolic environment. Organisations use public relations personnel to build and maintain relationships with specific audiences or publics. Public relations efforts are not about control, they are focused on building professional relationships and communication between stakeholders and the organisation. For this study, public relations focus on building and maintaining a positive online presence and fostering a communication channel between management, its employees, and its external publics (Skinner *et al.* 2016; Huang, Li and Markov 2020).

The occupation of public relations is centred on providing efficient service to its intended publics, focusing on public interest and ethical standards, which should be the primary consideration of the profession (Skinner *et al.* 2016). Public relations practitioners use social media to communicate the accurate representation of organisations, their core work, activities, plans and practices. PRISA promotes ethical practices, transparency and professionalism among their registered practitioners. PRISA is a service-orientated organisation that focuses on developing registered public relations practitioners. The interest of PRISA's members is at the centre of their operation and the professional development of their members is of the utmost importance. Section 2.6 will provide a more in-depth look into PRISA and its function as the association that governs the communications and public relations industry in southern Africa.

PRPs are required to be ethical and principled and uphold the principles of the organisation. PRPs are measured by ethical performance, thereby ensuring professionalism, accountability and transparency across the profession. The core responsibilities of a PRP are to be transparent, truthful and fair. When media houses seek information, PRPs are responsible for responding and or referring them to the

relevant personnel (Clear, Koonin and Pritchard 2015). PRPs should strive to be excellent and effective communicators that represent an organisation and uphold the reputation of the organisation. They need to convey information back and forth until they reach mutual understanding and consensus. PRPs should always research public perception and opinion and develop communication or public relations campaigns to address the issues or trends identified. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, PRPs serve as intermediaries between the organisation and the stakeholders by establishing effective communication channels.

The following section defines social media and discusses the rise of social media in organisational communication. It also highlights the significant role of PRPs in propelling organisations to improved levels of connectedness, productivity and sustainability.

## **2.5 Social media**

There are many definitions of social media, however for the purpose of this study four widely accepted definitions are explained as they most closely relate to this research that is exploring the influence of social media on organisational communication. As proposed by Mayfield (2008), social media are online platforms that have extensive space for users to access, create and disseminate information. Social media can also be defined as an interactive platform established by mobile and internet technology where users are able to engage in discussion, sharing, creating and modifying content (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy and Silvestre 2011; Marlowe, Bartley, and Collins 2017). Marlowe, Bartley, and Collins (2017: 8) explain social media as that which “is generally used to describe collaborative media creation and sharing on a fairly large-scale.” On the other hand, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010: 61) assert that social media are “web applications created by the technology and ideological foundation of web 2.0 that allow users to create content and interconnect with people.” It is challenging to provide a clear and accurate definition of social media in a way which pleases every individual, however, there is a general agreement that the term social media integrates technology and social interaction (Sparta 2012; Chang and Hsiao 2014; Inya 2017). These views

further highlight that the most significant function of social media is communication through creating and disseminating content.

Social media such as Twitter and Facebook have unlocked new communication methods among people worldwide. Organisations have also embarked on using social media platforms particularly for organisational communication. Organisations use social media to facilitate relationships with customers, gain loyalty, attract potential customers and improve engagement and rapport (Alharbie 2015; Kuruç and Opiyo 2017). There are many studies on how organisations use social media to market their products however, few studies address social media's influence on organisational communication. Social media enables dialogical communication, differentiating it from traditional media (Argyris and Monu 2015). Prior research has explained the nature of social media and propose that factors such as connectedness, participation, openness, conversation, and community are significant characteristics of social media (Hong 2013). Furthermore, identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation are noted as the key functions of social media (Kietzmann *et al.* 2011; Kaplan and Haenlein 2010); and dialogue, collaboration, knowledge, and sociability are the use-types (Schlagwein and Hu 2017).

Today, society is increasingly making use of social media platforms for professional and personal purposes. The use of social media for professional reasons is not limited to certain professions but impacts on numerous industries such as healthcare, retail, marketing, motor, beauty, tourism, security, and transport just to name a few. Social media enables organisations to achieve two-way spontaneous communication which allows for knowledge sharing, foster understanding and promote engagement. Online communication provides users with several opportunities such as connecting people in different locations globally and having instant two-way communication at any given time. Social media involves using mobile and web-based technologies that allow highly interactive communities and individuals to create, converse, share and adjust user-generated content. Social media platforms also refer to social communication platforms tenable users to share self-generated content such as photographs, videos, voice messages, voice notes and events with users. The impact of social media has been well researched over the past 20 years since its discovery. The web 2.0 has shown

tremendous growth and regarded by researchers as one of the most popular form of social interaction and information sharing platforms (Moorley and Chinn 2019; Celik, Muukkonen and Dogan 2021; Lara and Bokoch 2021).

Social media has gained millions of users worldwide over the years and have become an integral part of society, changing the way people communicate today. Users on online platforms get to explore mobile apps, create, share content, make transactions, and socialise with other users. The social and emotional interactions and experiences that occur online evolve. Furthermore, users on social media sites are becoming more and more demanding to organisations. Organisations now offer users comprehensive and emotionally satisfying experiences. Social media has provided users the ability to follow each other and provides a platform where users receive and share generated content. A single user can connect to millions of other users and contribute to the content they have published, shared or liked (Rafailidis, Nanopoulos, and Constantinou 2014; Ngai, Tao and Moon 2015; Irbo and Mohammed 2020).

Sparta (2012) states that social media was introduced in the early 2000s. However, it evolved over time, and this requires that organisations monitor the evolution of developments as they have a direct as well as indirect impact on their organisation's success and survival. It is imperative to understand the role of social media within organisations and subsequently the role of PRP's in using social media for internal and external organisational communication.

### **2.5.1 The rise of social media in organisational communication**

Social media is an umbrella term which captures different forms of online communication. This form of communication is made possible via web-based technologies and mobile technologies. These technologies enable users in organisations to reach out to their target audience. Social media can be divided into distinct categories based on the type of activity that the user chooses to undertake within these sites. These categories include blogging, microblogging, social networking and local-based media also known as social bookmarking (Hagg, Dahinten, and Currie 2018). "Social networking became much quicker with the arrival of the Internet and the globalization

that accompanied it, and this gave rise to innovative information communication technology (ICT) channels, which were dubbed social media and /Web 2.0” (Duffett 2017: 19-20). The endless availability of the internet and acceptance of social media has changed the landscape of communication. Social media platforms have become an integral part of the South African communication landscape. Despite the social media revolution currently being played globally, one crucial element remains unchanged and constant: the need to have the right content and platform for your audience to communicate your message successfully.

The Web 2.0 application which include social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Micro-blogging sites and similar technologies have been known to improve communication in many organisations. Communication with the organisations stakeholders through traditional media has been known to be costly. However, with the rapid increase in the use ICT and continuous development of social media afford organisations the benefit of reaching out to a mass audience faster and at a much lower cost. In the current business environment, organisations are competing to gain competitive advantage and building online presence is at the forefront for many organisations. Society and opinion leaders are getting onto social media, and for organisations to achieve desired goals, it has become impossible to ignore social media use. Apart from the disadvantages or shortfalls that come with the use of social media, there are more benefits such as the low cost and audience segmentation feature of social media sites (Kushwaha, Singh, Varghese and Singh 2020; Pogorevich 2020).

Social media has many functions including starting conversations, sharing information, and building presence, relationships and reputation. Marlowe, Bartley, and Collins (2017) propose the benefits of social network sites usage as

Media literacy, formal educational outcomes, informal education and learning, creativity, individual identity and self-expression, strengthening social relationships, belonging and collective identity, building and strengthening communities, civic and political participation, self-efficacy and well-being.

In terms of this study, PRISA stakeholders may use social media because of the experiences they find there. “The ongoing attraction... is the community – the people that use the space” (Johnson, Levine and Smith 2009: 29). Meanwhile, Kietzmann *et al.*

(2011) suggest that these functions can be beneficial and risky to individuals or organisations. The conversation and sharing functions are essential and interactive social media functions that enable people to communicate with other social media users and share content with other users (Lee and Ma 2012; Panahi, Watson and Partridge 2012; Kuruç and Opiyo 2017). Researchers assert that various discussions and interactions on social media can be monitored and used to benefit an organisation such as averting a crisis and responding timeously (Canhoto and Padmanabhan 2015; Pace, Buzzanca, and Fratocchi 2016; Hagg, Dahinten, and Currie 2018).

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube provide organisations with direct access to an unlimited and unprecedented amount of content. The type of content found on social media evoke debate and at other times unrest, leaving organisations with limited or even no control on the messages that are published. This kind of flexibility provided to users puts organisations in a tough position when it comes to reputation and image management. Internet based applications where users generate and share their own content, have an impact on the construction of social perception and how society views organisations. Therefore, social media networks are one of the popular online activities that have an impact on organisational policies and procedures of communication. The Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 have attracted an approximate number of 2.95 billion users in 2019 and an average consumption time of 136 minutes per day. The number presented in the 2019 statistics has shown dramatic increase in the year 2020 and 2021 due to the global COVID19 pandemic (Statista 2019; Hutchinson 2020).

The growth and development of these ICTs pose ethical challenges and implications. The same ethical considerations applied to traditional media applies in the online world. However, the impact on the online media is amplified due to its global nature and anonymity. The categories of these challenges and implications are “non-disclosure, data privacy and copyright, critical and offensive material, government censorship, activism, and blurring of work and personal lives” (Sorour and McArdle 2011: 49). PRPs are required to understand the implications of using social media to avoid reputational risk.

Social media platforms rely on user-generated content. Organisations must be both hands-on and responsive in managing posts that may impact their public image (Gwaka 2015; Cartwright, Davies and Archer-Brown 2021). Organisations need to monitor cases and matters in which they are mentioned. Reputational risks on social media platforms are often ignored, even though its impact can be severe. The main concern is that content can effortlessly be created, changed and distributed from numerous sources. It can typically result in disseminating unverified and unauthorised content that carries an organisation's identity, which may pose a reputational risk. Therefore, employees of the organisations are required to be professional in using social media, in the same way as expected of them regarding their behaviour in public (Dobrian 2013; Huang, Li and Markov 2020). Duane and O'Reilly (2017) and Lashgari, Sutton-Brady, Sølén and Ulfvengren (2018) raise concerns such as whether organisations are following or are followed by the right target audience in the different social media sites, how are the organisations' competitors performing on social networks and whether the information obtained online is productively utilised.

Juergens (2013) outlines that the use of social media in business has developed to be a globally accepted model, with just about 95% of South Africa's influential brands participating. Should organisations choose to ignore social media, they are highly likely to experience adverse consequences such as failure to maintain continuous contact with stakeholders. Organisations need to acknowledge that social media is a social platform where their target audience communicates. Therefore, organisations need to accept that their primary stakeholders use the tools for several reasons and their adoption of social media should match their stakeholders needs.

Due to social media's popularity and economic relevance over recent years, millions of users can share information promptly. At the same time, social networking sites have shifted their focus on building solid social relations among their users. It has left organisations with no choice but to integrate social media into their communication strategies. Furthermore, social media networks are empowering organisations and institutions to develop a more socially engaged business model. Social media has enabled organisations to build stronger relationships with their target audiences (Juergens 2013).

Social media's role in an organisation is beyond just communicating with its stakeholders through the medium. Social media has made it easy for management to reach the intended stakeholders both internally and externally. To position social media in organisational communication, it is essential to look at its particularities. The nature of social media enables the user to create and share information, placing a challenge on the control over the content published. However, social media enables an organisation to influence their stakeholders by building an intimate two-way communication, thereby leading to positive content published by the target audience (Badea 2014; Schlagwein and Hu 2017).

The use of social media by PRISA serves as a bridge to communicate with key stakeholders. Stakeholders affiliated with PRISA are spread across the Southern African region. It is difficult to communicate using traditional media, which is time-consuming, can cause delays, and is financially draining for the institution. Therefore, employees at PRISA have an essential role in creating a positive image and building relationships with the organisations' stakeholders through social media. One of the key objectives of this research is to understand how social media can improve and maintain effective organisational communication at PRISA.

In the present day, organisations use social media for numerous purposes. The structure of social media platforms consists of features that allow individuals to conduct activities without commanding strict restrictions, unlike traditional media. Organisations have used social media for various activities, such as hiring, communication, marketing, and customer queries and complaints. However, it is through the same use of these social media platforms that risks manifest in organisations. Despite intense debates in the industry on whether social media applications are a significant component in organisations, a noticeable number of organisations listed in the "Fortune 500 companies" have indicated existence on at least one social media platform (Gwaka 2015; Schlagwein and Hu 2017; Cartwright, Davies and Archer-Brown 2021).

Social media has revolutionised communication in society and organisations with its explosive growth and widespread application. The concept of social media has penetrated the workplace globally; thus, communication practitioners face compromising situations where they have no option but to adapt to the growing

phenomenon. In the past decade, organisations have been finding ways to incorporate social media in their operations. Social media has recently become one of the main drivers of organisational communication. Therefore, including social media into the integrated communication strategy of the organisation is vital (Chang and Hsiao 2014; Schlagwein and Hu 2017).

The shift in the manner of communication by organisations has occurred due to the demand for instant communication presented by social media to the public. Social media has become increasingly popular over the years. It not only includes social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and a host of other applications, but a wide range of collaborative platforms such as blogs, content communities, virtual social worlds and virtual game worlds (Thomas and Dittman 2016; Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Chan, Stukus, Leppink, Bigham, Mehta and Thoma 2018; Davis 2018; Kalsnes and Larsson 2018; Stier, Bleier, Lietz and Strohmaier 2018). PRISA can make use of these collaborative platforms to deliver continuous development programmes for remote practitioners. The use of social media by PRISA has become an important area to focus on, as more practitioners who affiliate with the association are utilising social media in their workplace.

The adoption of social media in the workplace is primarily motivated by big corporations such as “Facebook and Twitter”. The success of these corporations led organisations into adopting its use. Davis (2018: 25) indicates that prior studies have provided exploratory research on social media capabilities in the workplace. Furthermore, organisations today use social media for marketing purposes, building reputation, brand promotion and building brand image. However, researchers now recommend that social media allow organisations to communicate with their internal and external stakeholders and offer benefits concerning knowledge sharing and trust building (Ford and Mason 2013; Tsimonis and Dimitriadis 2014; Cheng, Fu and de Vreede 2017; Tsimonis Dimitriadis and Omar 2019).

Social media sites have further provided users with the freedom to publish their grievances about organisations on online platforms such as Facebook and Twitter that have many followers. The posting of a negative review about an organisations product

or service poses a threat to its reputation. To maintain the organisations' integrity and reputation, the organisation needs to ensure strategic responses. Organisations need to have measures in place to deal with these kinds of scenarios. Nwokah and Aeenee (2017) further point out that studies have highlighted that social media has negatively affected management on reducing productivity and creating a disturbance in the workplace. Despite the negative connotations linked to social media, organisations have embraced the use of social media and are finding ways to take advantage of the platforms. Even with the challenges presented by social media, organisations have been utilising online platforms to create and improve communication efficiency (Andriole 2010; Zheng, Martin, Brohman and Xu 2014; Cao, Guo, Vogel and Zhang 2015; Boddy and Dominelli 2017; Aslam, Muqadas, Imran and Saboor 2018; Anderson 2019; Irbo and Mohammed 2020; Evans, Bratton and McKee 2021).

Technological developments have influenced all organisational levels and functions, including the method organisations communicate with their stakeholders. The rapid growth and development of new media has brought challenges and opportunities for organisations such as keeping up to date with what is being posted by their stakeholders on online platforms and providing a suitable response timeously (Pace, Buzzanca, and Fratocchi 2016; Swart 2018). These challenges have created a growing demand for organisations to familiarise themselves with new media technology and adjust their communication strategies accordingly. PRISA faces this challenge as a communication management association. The use of social media in engaging with stakeholders is important and directly linked to the organisational aims and objectives of PRISA. Practitioners who register as members of PRISA are constantly looking at ways to improve communication with their respective stakeholders and the adoption of social media into their communication strategies.

It has become evident that not all organisations make use of social media efficiently in their organisational strategy. Organisations tend to use social media for marketing and product promotion strategies. Furthermore, studies on the use of social media and the access to ICTs in Africa focused primarily on developing societies (Van Dijk 2006; Bornman 2016; Poushter, Bishop, and Chwe 2018; Hagg, Dahinten and Currie 2018). Bornman (2016) points out that South Africa is a developing country with several

underprivileged communities with limited access to these information and communication technologies. Sub-Saharan Africa and Africa are considered the least computerised region globally, leading to emerging studies that focus on the digital divide and modernisation of African communities. This research is significant in that through the findings it aims to offer recommendations to PRISA and other public relations and communications organisations on how to use social media to improve and maintain social media functions strategically within their organisation.

**Table 2.1: Use types of social media in an organisation**

<b>SOCIAL MEDIA USE-TYPE:</b>	<b>IMPLEMENTATION IN ORGANISATIONS</b>
Information sharing	Communicating to intended stakeholders about the operations and initiatives of the organisation; Contributing valuable information that could change the lives of the community in which the organisation operates.
Building relationships, brand awareness and online presence	Ensuring that the organisation’s brand is visible on social media platforms through advertising, participating in discussions that affect the community; Building a positive reputation for the organisation; Enhancing relationships with internal and external stakeholders.
Engagement: the use of social media for creating dialogue	The organisation makes use of social media as a conversation starter. Participating and/or commenting on current affairs that have a direct or indirect impact on society; It can be used as a platform to engage with people from different industries; Stakeholders also make use of social media to reach out to organisations or raise concerns.
Collaboration: fostering relationships among employees and external stakeholders	Enables the organisation to collaborate with internal and external stakeholders on a variety of initiatives and conversations. The organisation can obtain the views, opinions of stakeholders and contribute to problem-solving.

The use of social media to store, maintain and retrieve knowledge	There are a variety of social media platforms. Some are used for information sharing and storage. Social media sites such as Instagram stores and share images of audio-visual material in good quality.
Generating leads and obtaining data	Organisations can make use of social media to obtain valuable data about their stakeholders. This can be achieved by implementing competitions and other initiatives that will require the stakeholder to share information.

**Source: Adapted from Schlagwein and Hu (2017)**

Managers face several other responsibilities to perform, suggesting that more stakeholders should be employed to effectively monitor social media risks within an organisation (Juergens 2013). Gwaka (2015) points out that some organisations have decided on a more conservative approach towards social media, but Juergens (2013) is enthusiastic that organisations that have not yet joined the social media phenomenon will ultimately follow. It is becoming clear that more organisations are starting to realise various organisational opportunities presented by social media as opposed to threats. Even though implementing social media policies is exceptionally significant and highly suggested, policies alone are not enough. In addition to social media policies, organisations should train their employees, monitor use, and provide suitable protection for companies' social media activities. Organisations need to consider that a single department cannot achieve this; the formulating of policies on the use of social media must involve all departments, as social media involves all functions within an organisation (Bregman 2012).

Organisations need to remember that simply establishing a presence is not satisfactory. Social media requires intensive and ongoing participation and attention. A social media review is important for any organisation regardless of the level of social media engagement. It is essential to note that reviewing social media is more than just evaluating the number of posts, likes, risks and rewards. Organisations should place focus on strategically including social networks into the business strategy. A social media review can also indicate the benefits missed by not partaking in social media.

Organisations need to ensure that they are followed by the right target audience and observe if they are attracting the desired audience.

Social media enables greater access to information, speed of information delivery and allows employees to save time and be more productive. Organisations have taken a step towards building more significant investment in social media. Social media is here to stay and can propel organisations to new levels of performance, competitiveness and sustainability (Gwaka 2015; Cartwright, Davies and Archer-Brown 2021).

Social media can reach many people and has the ability to direct organisations to specific target audiences, thereby making it easier for them to send their messages to desired audience. Organisations can use dedicated social networking sites and application to attract audiences with similar interests to the organisation. The rapid development and growth of ICTs continue to have a dramatic impact on the way organisations communicate with their target audience. As a result, organisations are more connected to their target audience than before (Tardanico 2012; Kuruç and Opiyo 2017). The use of these tools has gained popularity and is now dramatically influencing traditional business regarding consumer relationships. Social networking is on its way to changing business-to-business relationships. Despite the widespread fascination with the transformative capabilities of these tools, their consequences for organisational policies are less understood (Lovett 2011; Mergel, Mugar and Jarrahi 2012).

Therefore, the rapid growth of social media has pushed organisations to adopt it into their integrated communication strategies. Due to the growth in the number of people who are engaging with social media sites, organisations are left with no choice but to use the new communication strategy. In this regard, it has become evident that organisations can no longer ignore social media. It is a significant communication platform with a direct and indirect effect on sustainability and survival (Badea 2014).

Some organisations prefer the use of traditional media because they view social media as a significant threat. Managers need to note that social media has also influenced traditional media. To use social media to their advantage, they need to understand the

advantages and disadvantages presented by each social media platform (Badea 2014; Bossio, McCosker, Milne, Golding and Albarrán-Torres 2020).

Social media provides various communication tools and multiple communication channels that can be beneficial in both social and work environments. The information found on social media sites varies from consumer product preferences, customer behaviour, opinions, needs, wants of consumers, and other data that the organisation can use to gain a competitive advantage. Organisations need to understand that employees and other external stakeholders use social media to search and share information and use the medium to obtain a sense of belonging and develop relations. Social media enables stakeholders to have informal and formal social interaction quickly and beyond organisational boundaries. Organisations do not have to rely on traditional communication such as face-to-face communication and traditional media but should focus on the virtual community created by social media; this is more beneficial when employees work in different locations. Social media connects people with shared interests and backgrounds, making it easier for organisations to reach their audience faster, collaborate on projects and exchange ideas and information (Chang and Hsiao 2014; Cao, Guo, Vogel and Zang 2015).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the internet has singlehandedly provided organisations with the opportunity to reach a vast target audience and gain customer attention at a broad reach in a short space of time. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter present a significant opportunity for organisations interested in gaining a competitive advantage while simultaneously building an online presence. Organisations need to invest in new ways to incorporate social media in their organisational communication strategy. Social media may be used as a vehicle to increase the visibility of a brand or campaign. Social media platform users create and share content that they find interesting promoting word of mouth conversations among users. Social media is proliferating at a fast rate across the world and has become a trend prioritised in organisations today (Icha 2016).

Social media users are connected on a global scale and are actively engaged in each other's lives. It has granted organisations the opportunity to create relationships with people worldwide. When a social media user likes or shares content from an

organisation on a social media platform such as Facebook or Twitter, it may go viral quickly. Consumers have more trust in communication shared by their peers as opposed to paid advertising. Online reviews of organisations play an essential role in building a positive brand and gaining a competitive advantage (Kietzmann *et al.* 2011; Agwu and Murray 2015). Researchers propose that social media enables an organisation to communicate with stakeholders and allows for knowledge sharing (Ford and Mason, 2013) and building of trust (Cheng, Fu, and de Vreede 2017). This is particularly important for an organisation such as PRISA whose mandate is to foster professionalism, responsibility, sharing of knowledge and best practices in the industry.

### **2.5.2 Information sharing and interaction**

The World Wide Web has been referred to as the fastest-growing publishing medium of all time by scholars. Van Dijk (2006) defines the 21st century as a networked age terming it the “information highway”. He further describes networks as a human nervous system due to its ability to become part of peoples work and personal lives. Castells (2010) in the book “The rise of network society” describes new communication technologies that ensure communication organised by networks which is an elemental factor in the reality of people’s lives. Levinson (2009) defines this era as being “new media,” signifying its fundamental societal dimension. Internet World Stats (2021) indicate that the internet has presented an increase of 1,331.9 % in growth rate between the year 2000 and 2021. There is also an indication of 65.6% penetration rate projecting 5,168,780,607 internet users worldwide in 2021. These statistics show that the internet has become a primary source of communication.

The web has gone through rapid changes since its invention. Before providing a description of the Web 3.0 it is important to outline the developments from Web 1.0, Web 2.0 and ultimately the Web 3.0. The introduction of the internet and connectivity is referred to as the Web 1.0. It is the stage where the internet broke into economies, leaving room for organisations to operate in. The idea of the internet was solely focused on sharing of information. Communication technology changed the distribution system of information. Users could retrieve the organisation’s information on the company

websites or blogs. In addition, digital libraries were formed where data was published and stored.

Web 2.0 brought forward the ability to engage and interact in two-way conversations. The introduction of social media sites has shifted how organisations operate and communicate with their stakeholders. Web 2.0 is focused on fostering engagement among organisations and their stakeholders. Conversations are focused on creating understanding and building mutual, harmonious relationships among the stakeholders. Web 3.0 is more focused on adding artificial intelligence to Web 2.0. The computer and /or software's can pick up information shared among the participants in the social media site or websites to determine trends. These software's can group information related to the conversations or search results inserted by users on the internet. The server chooses information and shares the information with online users. Web 3.0 is more of a three-way communication between the organisation, stakeholders and artificial servers (Xie 2018; Internet World Stats 2021).

Castell (2010), Garoufallou and Charitopoulou (2011), and Xie (2018) motivate that the Web 2.0 technologies and applications have taken the web by storm. Web 2.0 and social networks are dominant and arouse millions of users' everyday private and professional lives. Scholars highlight that Web 2.0 incorporates a variety of different meanings that include an amplified emphasis on user-generated content, sharing and collaborative effort, together with numerous types of social software and new methods of engaging with applications (Harris and Rea 2009; Garoufallou and Charitopoulou 2011; Ilo, Nkiko, Ugwu, Ekere, Izuagbe and Fagbohun 2021). Most of the emerging Web 2.0 services are comparatively user friendly and establish the only media that can simultaneously provide the possibility for one-to-many and many-to-many synchronous communications (Harris and Rea 2009; Ilo, Nkiko, Ugwu, Ekere, Izuagbe and Fagbohun 2021).

Johnson, Becker, Estrada, and Freeman (2014) highlight that today's web users are productive creators of content. These active participants of the Web 2.0 upload photographs, videos, and audios to the cloud in large numbers simultaneously. The Web 2.0, like the internet, are available seven days a week and 24 hours a day for the users to

share user-generated information. Web 2.0 is a form of new media used to describe various websites and applications that allow users to generate and publish in real-time. A significant feature of the technology is that it permits people to produce, share, collaborate and communicate with other users. Web 2.0 also provides an indication of the change in which the internet facilitates its collaborative, innovative nature. Focus is on the consumer and their contributions to the richness of online content. The internet has become an arena for user involvement and interaction, where the promotion of more active use and the development of digital communities is enhanced.

Having discussed the value of communication, the role of public relations and the rise of social media in organisations in the previous sections, the following section provides a discussion on the unit of analysis in this study, the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa.

## **2.6 Background to PRISA and associations in the Public Relations industry**

There are various professional public relations associations around the world. The Global Alliance (GA) for Public Relations and Communication Management is one of the world's most significant public relations and communication management associations, representing about 160 000 practitioners and educators across the globe (Global Alliance 2021). The mission of the GA is “to unify the public relations profession, raise professional standards all over the world, share knowledge for the benefit of its members and be the global voice for public relations in the public interest” (Global Alliance 2021: 1). The GA has various affiliated public relations associations in Australia, Canada, China, Southern Africa, the USA, and the United Kingdom. PRISA is a founding member of the GA and started developing the Council for Communication Management (CCM) in South Africa (PRISA 2021). The GA (2021) relies on the efforts of communication professionals to confront common difficulties with a global perspective by associating with regional, national and international bodies to increase professionalism in the public relations and communication sector. The GA aims to enrich and improve professionalism of the industry among its affiliates globally (Ikosa 2013).

PRISA was established in 1957 and represents professionals in public relations and communication management in most countries across the Southern African region, such as, Lesotho, Swaziland, Botswana, Namibia and South Africa (PRISA 2021). PRISA is a registered Section 21 company, and activities include training and development programmes, meetings, conferences, writing for publication and research activities, planning and sponsoring conferences and mentoring and coaching. PRISA is one of the leading public relations professional bodies in the world, with over 2500 members. Skinner *et al.* (2016: 18) further highlight that “PRISA aims to foster the professionalisation of the practice in Southern Africa; to establish public relations as a strategic management function; to uphold professional ethics and standards amongst members and to provide value-added services to members.” PRISA’s primary objectives include,

To unite consultants countrywide under the PRISA umbrella; to provide a forum for networking and professional development; to gain credibility for public relations consulting nationally; to professionalise the public relations consulting industry; and to foster links with allied industries and international consultants (PRISA 2021: 1)

Since the beginning of a new democratic age in South Africa, the public relations profession has reflected dramatic changes in the country’s profession. The active involvement in creating the GA for public relations and communication management has provided PRISA with the opportunity to present its associated members a foot on the global scale. Skinner *et al.* (2016: 19) explains that PRISA’s membership in the GA yielded significant benefits to its members, such as the shared recognition of qualifications and registrations. PRISA exposes its members to the global best practices and engagement and interaction with top practitioners in the world. PRISA is also a vital member of the African Public Relations Association (APRA), representing about 20 countries in the African continent.

In terms of membership management, PRISA (2021) focuses mainly on retaining and recruiting new members. This is currently not done on social media platforms but rather on a face-to-face or e-mail basis. PRISA South Africa deployed several retention strategies that will assist with attracting new members, and part of those strategies is the use of social media. Relationship and membership management are vital to any

association as they serve as assistance to organisations in managing issues and resolving crises effectively.

Organisations develop social media policies to take advantage of the benefits of social media. However, the researcher was informed that PRISA does not have a social media policy in place. Policies are important because almost all organisations make decisions based on policy and can provide employees with guidelines and instructions on phenomenon such as social media use. Social media policies in particular are vital in shaping employees' shared understanding on the uses and benefits of social media.

PRISA (2021) maintains that Continuous Professional Development (CPD) enables public relations practitioners to expand their knowledge and develop the personal qualities needed to enhance and strengthen their practice. CPD cultivates professional competencies, and they are vital for survival in a dynamic and sometimes unpredictable business environment. The rapid growth and change brought by ICTs have left public relations practitioners with no choice but to constantly improve themselves if they want to remain relevant in the field.

Skinner, Von Essen, Mersham and Motau (2016: 23) define accreditation as the “professional designation awarded to PR practitioners who possess unique qualifications that characterise a true professional”. Skinner *et al.* (2016: 23) further explain that the accreditation process executed by PRISA is internationally recognised, and it is the highest level that a public relations practitioner can reach within the PRISA registration system. The candidate must be in position of five years of full-time work or teaching experience in public relations and a bachelor's degree in a communication related field to be qualified for accreditation. PRISA (2021: 1) also defines accreditation “as the professional registration awarded to public relations and communication management practitioners who demonstrate a level of special qualities that characterise a true professional.” Accreditation is the highest level of the PRISA registration system, based on academic qualifications and experience in the field. PRISA's accreditation assesses the depth of the specialists' knowledge and expertise and the programme - Accredited Public Relations (APR) is equivalent to internationally recognised

programmes in the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia (Skinner *et al.* 2016). It is also recognised by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA).

This section affirmed the significant role of PRISA and its contribution in uniting practitioners and driving transformation in the industry. The following sections (2.7 and 2.8) provides the theoretical underpinning of the study.

## **2.7 Uses and Gratification Theory**

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) is rooted in communications literature. It is an integral theory of communication that explains why people use mass media and what needs are satisfied by media use. The emergence of social media gave new life and meaning to this theory. “Uses and gratifications theory has specific relevance to social media, but it has not been given prominence in the marketing and social media literature” (Whiting and Williams 2013: 363). This research seeks to apply UGT to explain and demonstrate the importance of UGT to social media; and to identify the uses and gratifications that users (study participants) receive from using social media in an organisational context.

The rapid growth of social media and ICTs have led to a spiking interest among scholars, marketers, communications and public relations practitioners, economists, celebrities (who are referred to as influencers today) and socio-political institutions. Incorporating social media in integrated communication and marketing strategies is now an essential factor for organisations, thereby satisfying the needs of the users seeking services or goods that the organisation offers. This helps the users’ needs and assists the organisation in reaching its communication and marketing objectives effectively. UGT was established in 1974 to scrutinise media consumption and how the consumer uses it and the satisfaction it provides for users (Blumler and Katz 1974).

As has been explained in this study, social media is any form of digital media that can be utilised to share information, photographs, sound and videos, and any other material that can be transmitted through virtual communication. UGT looks at the many reasons why a user may share, create or obtain information on the internet (Popoola 2014;

Musa, Azmi and Ismail 2015; Eginli and Tas 2018). In terms of this study, the researcher aims to understand the gratification obtained from using social media and why practitioners engage in social media in their organisational context.

UGT framework has been constantly tested and developed over the years. According to Blumler and Katz (1974: 76), in its original design, the theory consisted of five key elements that are still relevant in society:

The audience is acknowledged to be an active participant in mass media; Each audience member should decide which medium will best satisfy his or her needs for a specified use; Media channels compete to gratify the audience's needs and cannot fulfil all human needs; Experiential data assessment can help control the aims of mass media users since users are self-aware enough to describe their motives regarding social media use sufficiently; Decisions about the cultural relevance of mass media should essentially be withheld to evade assumption on popular culture.

UGT emphasis is more about what people do with the media than what impact or influence the media has on the person (Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch *et al.* 1974; Eginli and Tas 2018). From this point of view, those using social media are active in selecting and using the media based on their needs. When users use the media for specific purposes, they get certain satisfaction (Stafford *et al.* 2004; Eginli and Tas 2018). In terms of PRISA, if valuable and developmental information such as training and workshops are disseminated via Facebook and Twitter, practitioners will actively engage on the platform as it contributes to their knowledge, growth and development.

UGT offers five supporting assumptions on media use that are still relevant today. The first assumption relates to communication behaviour which is driven and directed by a goal. The second proposes that users or people take on an active position when selecting the communication media to satisfy their needs. The theory's third assumption is that people define their communication reasons, intentions and gratifications. The fourth involves the media's focus on providing communication styles, selecting and using media and the competition between communication tools. The last assumption is that many social and psychological factors affect people when selecting communication mediums (Flaherty, Pearce, and Rubin 1998: 252).

The universal nature and use of social media have changed society, and this transformation has involved significant attention from both businesses and the academic world. The organisational implementation and use of social media are overwhelmed with many challenges, sometimes leaving organisational managers frustrated at not accomplishing the desired results. This emergent and complex nature of the social media phenomenon requires researchers to consider novel approaches when conducting social media research. As organisational communication theorists engaging in research on the social media phenomenon increases, so too does the need to develop relevant and rigorous social media theories (Roberts 2019). UGT, rooted in “communications literature can be an integral part of developing better scales and measurement instruments” for those working with social media (Whiting and Williams 2013: 362).

The use of media by people can be explained in two ways. Firstly, based on content gratification and secondly based on process gratification - the experience of using media. In social media, it can be pronounced that it offers more content gratification as people have the opportunity to communicate with others (McGuire 1974; Eginli and Tas 2018). In the organisational context, this can prove beneficial as it can enable networking, partnerships, exchange of ideas, collaboration on projects, richer content, and a range of opportunities to contribute to organisational development.

A central reason for social media providing gratification to users, mainly in the working world, is that information can be acquired and exchanged immediately. More importantly, this exchange has no boundaries as it can be done globally (Ngcongong 2016: 16). In the case of PRISA, members of the organisation can use social media such as Facebook and Twitter to disseminate global best practices and engagement and interaction with top practitioners worldwide.

This section demonstrated the significance and value of UGT to social media research. The application of UGT to social media supports an understanding of the reasons users use social media. The data in Chapter 4 will further provide a rich and comprehensive understanding of why users utilise social media, and these findings can contribute to organisations more effective marketing and communication with their stakeholders.

The following section unpacks the Systems Theory Approach and suggests that organisations can employ social media to function within an open systems approach to public relations.

## **2.8 The Systems Theory Approach**

A system's theory approach presents essential insights into the functioning and survival of an organisation (Ansari 2004; and Musheke and Phiri 2021). The systems theory states that organisations consist of interconnected systems. These systems are interrelated so that one department is unable to function effectively without the assistance of the other. For example, the public relations, marketing and human resources department rely on the finance department to effectively achieve their goals and objectives set in their campaigns or projects. The financial office relies on other departments to perform for the organisation to have a reasonable budget. Each sub-system needs to function effectively for the entire system to function as a whole. The systems theory approach has a universal appeal in research as it provides a meta-language to address problems in various disciplines.

Furthermore, "System theorists believe that organisations that function as an open system have a greater chance of survival than organisations that function as a closed system due to the exchange of inputs and outputs between the organisation and its publics" (Reitz 2012: 1). Ansari (2004: 1) further defines a system as a set of interconnected and independent portions or departments that are arranged in a manner that produces a unified whole. Ansari (2004: 1) clarifies that systems theory focuses on the relations between the parts. Rather than reducing an entity, the systems theory focuses on the arrangement of and relations between the parts and how they work together as a whole. The way the parts are organised and how they cooperate determines the properties of that system. The behaviour of the system is independent of the properties of the elements. This is often referred to as a holistic approach to understanding phenomena.

Researchers in the communications and public relations field often propose embracing a dialogic approach to public relations. This promotes mutual interaction between the

organisation and its public, underpinning an open systems approach (Reitz 2012; Hiscock 2019; Musheke and Phiri 2021). This study suggests that organisations can employ social media to function within an open systems approach to public relations. In addition, operating and serving as an open system enables an organisation to adapt to and be more responsive to changes in the environment due to its communication and mutual understanding with the public (Cutlip, Center and Broom 2000; Lubbe 2004; Reitz 2012).

At one time, communications and public relations practitioners carried out their duties with a simplistic approach as if organisations were closed systems (Dozier 1990; Edwards 2016; Hiscock 2019) and functioned predominantly to uphold the image of the organisation without cognisance of the changes in the environment or the interconnectedness of the environment. As public relations theory states, an organisation is connected to its environment through the public (Patel, Xavier and Broom 2005), so understanding the changes within the public's environment can be crucial for organisational survival. Thus, understanding these changes lends itself to a dialogic model of public relations that focuses on reciprocity, the negotiation of exchanges of ideas and opinions (Kent and Taylor, 1998). Therefore, social media such as Facebook and Twitter can promote a dialogic approach between an organisation and its public and is aligned appropriately to the open systems approach.

Ansari (2004) further explains that a system comprises objects, attributes, relationships and environment, which are described as follows:

**Objects:** A system consists of elements or members, which may be physical, abstract or both.

**Attributes:** This refers to the qualities and assets of the system itself.

**Relationships:** The mutual effects and constraints of each part of a system upon the others.

**Environment:** The system exists in an environment, affecting the system or being affected by it.

Ansari (2004) further notes that any given system comprises five qualities, these are described as follows:

**Wholeness:** Systems often consist of objects or parts that are interrelated or connected. Systems are focused on working together to achieve or fulfil specific objectives. In this study, PRISA in operating as an open system has inter-related parts that fulfil the organisation's overall goal. The registered practitioners and other stakeholders such as the SAQA, Department of Higher Education and Higher educational institutions work together with PRISA to fulfil the organisations' mandate. Each part of the system plays a role in ensuring that the mandate is achieved. Systems have properties that vary from those of their parts; these properties connect the different parts.

**Hierarchy:** Systems are all viewed as sub-systems that belong to a more significant system and, in turn, as systems that comprise sub-systems. Therefore, organisations function as a system as they consist of inter-related departments that rely on each other.

**Self-regulation:** Organisations are self-regulated. They strongly rely on the integration of the effective functioning of the sub-systems. Self-regulation guides the operations of a system towards a specific goal.

**Openness:** Systems may be open or closed. Open systems have absorbent boundaries, which allow for a free flow and exchange of information, material and or energy with their environments. This, therefore, makes it easier for organisations when it comes to the use of social media. The organisation may then create a continuous relationship with its target audience through Web 2.0. Contrary, closed systems are separate from their environments.

**Adaptability:** The vibrant nature of open systems focuses on evolving processes rather than static structures. An organisation that functions as an open system looks at the changes that arise in the environment and adapt to those changes.

Organisations that engage in social media can transfer into an open systems public relations model because both the organisation and its publics become content creators and consumers of online content. “Social media have the potential to enhance the openness of the system because of the dual creator ability and the synchronicity of the unique environment” (Reitz 2012: 44). The systems theory approach is developed from diverse study fields and can be applied to a variety of studies. In this study, the systems theory provides a picture of how PRISA operates as an open system where all stakeholders belonging in the interrelated sections or department work together to achieve the mandate set by the organisation. This ‘give and take’ or ‘two-way’ communication environment that fosters dialogue and is akin to mutual understanding fundamentally underpins an ‘open system’ public relations model that can potentially contribute to the survival of an organisation.

These theoretical underpinnings provided a basis to understand the role of social media in organisational communication at PRISA.

## **2.9 Conclusion**

This chapter reviewed the literature on social media and how it has impacted organisational communication. The study further provided background to PRISA and its role in the industry. The Uses and Gratification Theory was applied as the grounding theory to understand why the variables in the study use the media and what needs the media use satisfies. This chapter also proposed that social media such as Facebook and Twitter can promote a dialogic approach between an organisation and its public and is therefore aligned appropriately to the open Systems Theory Approach.

The literature reviewed highlighted that social media touches all aspects of personal and business life. Society is adapting to social media as a primary communication medium, and organisations must adapt to the use of social media to build mutually beneficial relationships. Social networks are online services that are primarily free and provide audiences with the opportunity to create responsive and harmonious relationships. Organisations can create an online presence and communicate with billions of users. There is a lack of understanding of the purpose of social media concerning

organisations, even though industries have come to acknowledge it as an essential factor to look at. Communication and public relations practitioners are responsible for training senior management on the uses and benefits of social media. The rapid growth of ICTs has resulted in organisations adapting to the change as their competitors use the medium to reach their customers and thereby achieve a competitive advantage. Therefore, organisations need to incorporate social media in their integrated communication strategies when planning.

The next chapter provides the research methodology employed in this study.

# CHAPTER 3 – RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

## 3.1 Introduction

This chapter describes, justifies and discusses the research design, data collection methods, the research instrument and the data analysis techniques. It also addresses the concept of validity and reliability. The aim and purpose of this research is to analyse the influence of social media, specifically Facebook and Twitter on organisational communication. This study examined the perceptions of social media by public relations and communication practitioners affiliated with PRISA and employees of PRISA.

## 3.2 Research design

Research design is a map in the research journey that guides the researcher in the pursuit to obtain answers to research questions as objectively, accurately and economically as possible (Trochim 2006; Zainal 2007; Kumar 2014; Sileyew 2019). Research design is also the overall strategy selected to integrate different components of a study coherently and logically to address the research objectives effectively. The objectives of this study are:

- To explore how PRISA uses social media to communicate with registered public relations practitioners.
- To assess how PRISA has adapted to the use of social media in its organisational communication strategy.
- To analyse the employees' and PRISA registered public relations practitioners' perception of social media's influence on organisational communication.
- To offer an understanding of how social media can improve and maintain effective organisational communication.

The Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA) served as the unit of analysis in this study. PRISA is an institute that represents public relations and communication

practitioners in the Southern African region. A case study consists of distinct characteristics and can clearly describe the phenomenon and unpack it to its depth (Yin 2014; Yazan 2015). Yazan (2015) maintains that a case study is a common approach used in qualitative research. A case study provides a holistic description of a phenomenon within specific parameters. Silverman (2013: 142) further explains that “a case study refers to the study of social phenomenon carried out within the boundaries of one social system (the case), or within the boundaries of a few social systems (the cases), such as people, organisations, groups, individuals and local communities or nation-states”, in which the phenomenon being studied exists. Yin (2014) further describes that the strength of a case study lies in its ability to break down a phenomenon into elements, investigate a phenomenon within its context and take on an experiential investigation to achieve an in-depth understanding of its context. For this reason, the researcher selected a case study approach (PRISA) to understand the influence of social media on organisational communication.

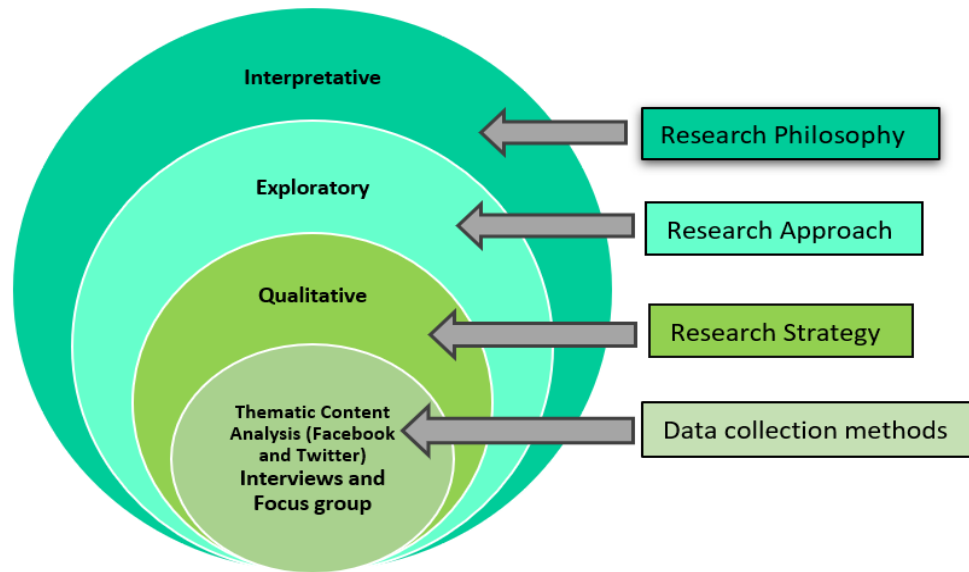
### **3.2.1 The Interpretative Qualitative approach**

The researcher adopted an interpretative, exploratory, qualitative research approach in this study. The advantage of qualitative research is that the researcher can work with thick, in-depth description and garner factual and rich data. Furthermore, the interpretative nature of the qualitative approach enabled the researcher to draw a rich understanding of the influence of social media in organisational communication. In this study, the exploration and interpretation of perceptions and opinions on the use of social media required the use of a qualitative research method (Leedy and Ormrod 2001) to gain an understanding on the use of social media and how it can be used to improve and maintain effective organisational communication in communication and public relations organisations. Interpretivism is a search for meaning and understanding located within the data set and to understand the subjective world of human experience. In this study, the focus on spoken words by participants through interviews and a focus group discussion provided a means to understand their lived experiences on the use of social media. This approach further provided a lens through which the researcher was able to learn from participants (Marshall and Rossman 2014) and understand the meaning that influenced their responses on the influence of social media on organisational

communication. Leavy (2017: 124) suggests qualitative methods enable the “robust” understanding of an area, topic or phenomenon and “unpacking the meanings people ascribe to activities, situations, circumstances, people, and objects”.

In addition, qualitative research methodology refers to research that produces findings not achieved using a statistical procedure or in any other manner of quantification. Qualitative research methods focus on understanding the researched phenomenon and can be used to investigate how much is already known. Using a qualitative approach enables participants’ “recollection” and interpretation of lived experiences to create meaning (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2019: 149). In this study the researcher used a qualitative research method to delve into and obtain information regarding the perception and practice of public relations practitioners around the use and influence of social media. The researcher obtained an analysis of the perceptions from both the internal and external publics. The qualitative methodology allowed the researcher to be actively involved in the research process, observe behaviour, responses and emotions expressed by participants during the discussions and make sense of multiple texts. It enhanced the quality of the data collected and thus, the findings produced.

Quantitative research makes sense when the researcher knows what the essential variables are, and when they can advise on reasonable ways of controlling or measuring them. However, in a situation where it is challenging to outline the vital variables, one has to consider the use of open-ended, inductive evaluation made possible by qualitative research (Jameel, Shaheen and Majid 2018). The qualitative approach is most common in research within the interpretive paradigm, to explore and understand a particular phenomenon within its social, political and historical context (Creswell 2003). In this study, the researcher employed an interpretative research philosophy, an exploratory research approach, a qualitative research strategy as illustrated in Figure 3.1. Various data collection techniques were employed to obtain information to achieve the set objectives of the study. The researcher collected data in three ways, mainly thematic content analysis (Facebook and Twitter), structured interviews and a focus group discussion as illustrated in Figure 3.1. These data collection methods will be explained in detail in section 3.5.



**Figure 3.1: Overview of the methodological approach of the study (adapted from Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012))**

### **3.3 Population/target population**

The population comprises members or collective of individuals, who meet specific criteria required for the research investigation (Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis and Bezuidenhout 2014; Alvi 2016). The population in this study is PRISA affiliated public relations practitioners and public relations and communications practitioners employed at PRISA.

### **3.4 Sampling method**

Non-probability purposive sampling was the sampling method employed to meet the objectives of the research. This type of sampling enabled the researcher to focus on specific characteristics of the population and thereby fulfil the study's aims and objectives which is to analyse the influence of social media on organisational communication at PRISA. In a non-probability sample subjects are usually selected based on their accessibility, or by the researcher's purposive personal judgement (Mugera 2013: 1). The type of non-probability sampling technique used in the study will be convenience sampling due to the accessibility of the variables to the researcher.

The researcher facilitated face-to-face interviews with five affiliated PRISA members, using semi-structured interview schedules. At the write up of the research proposal, PRISA had 19 permanent employees who would have participated in three focus groups. However, due to several financial reasons, the organisation underwent restructuring during the research period and the number of full-time employees was reduced significantly and therefore one focus group discussion took place at the PRISA offices with five employees. This venue was decided on due to its privacy and because participants are familiar with the environment, thereby finding it comfortable to share experiences on the research topic (Yin 2011; Do and Yamagata-Lynch 2017; King, Horrocks and Brooks 2019). The selection of focus group discussion participants involved the following principles or criteria:

- Member of the communication or public relations team.
- Working in the communication department for more than one year. It was to ensure that the practitioners have a deep insight and understanding of the practice and the department.
- Employees that are directly dealing with communications and public relations and most importantly social media.

### **3.5 Data collection methods**

#### **3.5.1 Thematic content analysis**

The researcher analysed PRISA's current social media platforms, specifically Facebook and Twitter. The content analysis of these social media platforms was conducted for one month from 15<sup>th</sup> September 2019 to 15<sup>th</sup> October 2019. The researcher had hoped to review the communication and social media policy of PRISA; however, as indicated in Chapter 2, the organisation has not drafted a policy around the use of social media use.

#### **3.5.2 Interviews**

The researcher conducted five in-depth interviews with PRISA affiliated members. The participants in the study are qualified professionals who are practising in the industry as

public relations practitioners, managers, lecturers and academic managers. The interviews allowed the researcher to gain a clear understanding of how PRISA makes use of social media in communicating with its publics or intended stakeholders. The interviews took place between 05<sup>th</sup> October and 30<sup>th</sup> October 2019.

### **3.5.3 Focus group discussion**

Five PRISA employees participated in a focus group discussion. These employees are directly involved in social media and have influence on the social media content that the organisation publishes on Facebook and Twitter. These participants are responsible for organising training workshops, sourcing facilitators, planning PRISA events such as the annual conference and student conference, co-ordinating membership and accreditations and internal and external communication.

### **3.5.4 Summary of data collection methods**

The researcher examined how PRISA employees use social media to communicate with external publics or stakeholders using the three methods of gathering data. Furthermore, the methods provided an understanding on the perception of the use of social media by PRISA affiliated practitioners and employees and how social media is received, incorporated, and implemented by public relations practitioners in the industry. These perceptions will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

## **3.6 Measuring instrument**

### **3.6.1 Thematic content analysis**

Thematic content analysis was applied and PRISA's social media platforms, particularly Facebook and Twitter were analysed for one month. The researcher also aimed to examine the social media policies at PRISA and was informed that usage is fairly new, and policies have not yet been implemented.

### 3.6.2 Interviews: semi-structured interview schedule

A semi-structured interview schedule was used to conduct face-to-face interviews. The researcher used predominantly open-ended questions to gain rich, in-depth data on the influence of social media on organisational communication. Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis and Bezuidenhout (2014) indicate that open-ended and close-ended questions differ in that close-ended questions tend to limit the participants to the set of alternatives being offered, while open-ended questions allow the participant to express an opinion without being influenced by the researcher. The open-ended questions enabled participants to express their beliefs and experiences on the use of social media. The questionnaire guided avenues of inquiry and aimed to obtain opinions, beliefs and views about the influence of social media on organisational communication (Reja, Manfreda, Hlebec, and Vehovar 2003; Welman, Kruger and Mitchell 2005; Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis and Bezuidenhout 2014). The semi-structured interview further enabled the researcher to engage in follow-up questions on the research phenomenon being researched (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018: 9).

Interviews were set up telephonically with the key informants. The individual interview sessions took approximately 20 to 30 minutes. Data from the face-to-face interviews were transcribed verbatim. The researcher opted to transcribe the data as this enabled a deep understanding of participants' responses. Data was coded and themes identified. The researcher probed questions such as: *In what way has PRISA incorporated the use of social media in its organisational strategy? And how has the use of social media platforms by PRISA influenced organisational communication? In your view, to what extent has social media impacted organisational communication?*

Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis and Bezuidenhout (2014) note that in-depth interviews are a form of qualitative data collection methods aimed at finding out more about the opinions, beliefs and perceptions of the participants on a specific phenomenon. Sileyew (2019) further notes that interviews are conversations customised to detail information by applying open-ended questions and when interviews are conducted correctly, they can be a valuable source of information. They allowed the researcher to interpret participants' responses to specific questions to gain a deeper understanding of the

research area. The benefits of in-depth interviews are the flexibility they offer to the researcher to clarify the participants' point of view. The nonverbal reactions of the participants could be used as an additional source of data that can be used in the analysis and interpretation. The qualitative, exploratory interviews explored in-depth ways to understand participants' experiences and the meanings these experiences bring to their world. The interviews enabled two people, the researcher and participant to discuss a particular issue of similar interest, through engaging in conversation (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018).

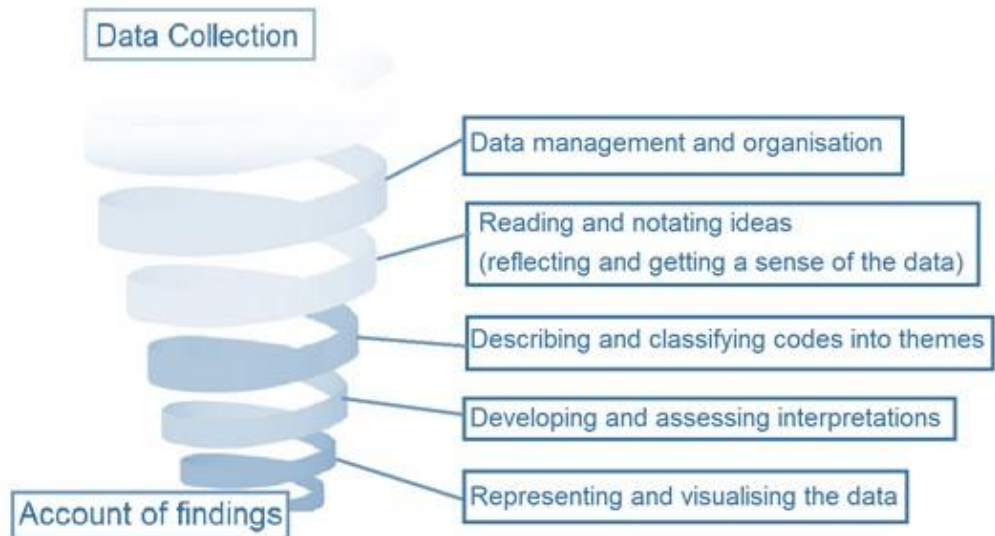
### **3.6.3 Focus group discussion: semi-structured interview schedule**

A semi-structured interview schedule with primarily open-ended questions was used in the focus group discussion. The focus group discussion allowed for a deep understanding of how PRISA incorporates social media in its communication strategy. The focus group discussion used probing questions to understand the influence of social media on organisational communication. The focus group discussion was conducted on the 01st of November 2019. It was audio-recorded, and the data generated was transcribed verbatim. As in the interviews, the researcher opted to conduct the transcription and thereafter data was coded, and codes were classified into themes. NVIVO supported the organisation and categorisation of the collected data.

### **3.7 Data analysis**

The analysis of data is an essential step in the research process. Information obtained in the thematic content analysis (Facebook and Twitter observation), semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion were analysed to provide responses to the research objectives and formulate conclusions and recommendations. The analysis and interpretation of data indicates recommendations that could be offered to practitioners, managers and organisations. "The process of qualitative data analysis and interpretation can best be represented by a spiral image, a data analysis spiral, in which the researcher moves in analytic circles rather than using a fixed linear approach" (Creswell 2013: 182; Creswell 2015; and Creswell 2018). Data analysis, as indicated in Figure 3.2, included following a multi-step process: familiarising oneself with the data, reading and

notating, coding the data, generating themes, reviewing the themes and presenting the findings (Assarroudi, Nabavi, Armat, Ebadi and Vaismoradi, 2018). Data was analysed using three techniques namely thematic content analysis, interviews and focus group discussion.



**Figure 3.2: Data analysis spiral (Creswell and Poth 2018: 186)**

### **3.7.1 Thematic content analysis**

An analysis of PRISA’s current social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) was conducted, and key themes were identified. These themes will be unpacked in Chapter 4.

### **3.7.2 Interviews**

Five interviews were conducted with PRISA affiliated members. The participants in the study were registered and accredited members of the institute. Details of the participant’s gender, age and race will be provided graphically in Chapter 4. The interview discussions were recorded, analysed and transcribed verbatim. Table 3.1 and Table 3.2 provides the codes that were used to maintain the anonymity of participants of the focus group discussion and interviews.

**Table 3.1: Participants' Coding - Interviews**

<b>PARTICIPANT</b>	<b>*CODING</b>
Interview 1	PM (I1)
Interview 2	OB (I2)
Interview 3	LM (I3)
Interview 4	NS (I4)
Interview 5	AW (I5)

\*I - Interview

### **3.7.3 Focus group discussion**

The focus group discussion took place at the PRISA offices with the communication and public relations team employees. One focus group was held due to the downsizing of staff by the organisation during the study period. The focus group offered a deep understanding of the factors influencing organisational communication at PRISA and probed to understand perceptions surrounding Facebook and Twitter usage by the organisation. The data collected was analysed and transcribed verbatim. The focus group allowed the researcher to understand PRPs' perception of how social media influences organisational communication.

**Table 3.2: Participant Coding – Focus group**

<b>PARTICIPANT</b>	<b>*CODING</b>
Focus group participant 1	FGR.P1
Focus group participant 2	FGR.P2
Focus group participant 3	FGR.P3
Focus group participant 4	FGR.P4
Focus group participant 5	FGR.P5

\*FGR.P – Focus group participant

### **3.7.4 Summary of data analysis**

Transcribing the data was useful as it offered the researcher a richer and fuller perspective of the data collected. Apart from an audio recording of the interviews and focus group discussion, the researcher notating ideas in the form of field notes during and after the discussions. The note-taking was valuable, particularly while analysing and interpreting the data. It enabled the researcher to note down his initial thoughts and ideas on the data before the formal data analysis recommended by Nowell *et al.* (2017). In addition, all interviews and focus group discussion were transcribed with all the 'nuances' as explained by (Harding 2019) which include pauses and expressions. This allowed for richer subjectivity in the interpretation of the data set. The focus group discussion offered a significant understanding of how PRISA deems social media an essential feature of organisational communication.

The researcher employed a listening technique during interviews and the focus group discussion, and this enabled participants to freely express themselves without the researcher interrupting or imposing his views. Using this technique allowed the researcher to position the experiences of participants within the research framework. Data collected from the analysis of content (Facebook and Twitter), interviews and focus group discussion will be discussed in Chapter 4 using common themes that emerged.

### **3.8 Pre-testing**

Sunday and Van Wyk (2011: 12) explain pre-testing as a measurement for a starting point of pre-existing knowledge on the research topic. External publics who are affiliated members of PRISA, participated in a pretesting interview. The pre-testing allowed the researcher to verify that the questions were clear, easily understood and contained unambiguous language. The pre-test findings assisted the researcher in developing, modifying and refining the final questionnaire and improved the quality of the research instruments.

### 3.9 Validity and reliability

Noble and Smith (2018) indicate that reliability is a matter of ensuring that when a particular technique is applied repeatedly to the same object, it will yield the same results. Validity and reliability are important features that evaluate any measuring tool in research. Validity is the extent to which an experimental measure sufficiently reproduces the real meaning of the concept under construction. In this study, the reliability of the research was ensured by using appropriately constructed interview schedules, an audio recording of all data collected and consent from participants. Furthermore, to draw reliable, in-depth data, all participants were asked the same questions. These approaches ensured the reliability of data garnered. In addition, participants and the researcher were unanimous in their agreement on the setting selected for the interviews and the focus group discussion. These were held in isolation and ensured that participants did not feel intimidated.

Interviewer bias can be a weakness of the interview process (Saunders *et al.* 2012) and can be prevented if the questions are presented to participants consistently (Collis and Hussey, 2009). This study reduced interview bias using a checklist as proposed by Collis and Hussey (2009):

**Table 3.3: Interview Checklist**

CHECKLIST QUESTIONS	IMPLEMENTATION IN STUDY
1. Ask questions as worded in the interview questionnaire.	The researcher ensured that questions were asked as per the interview questionnaire, using wording consistently in the interview process.
2. Proceed slowly using constant intonation and emphasis.	Questions were asked slowly and attentively. This was to ensure that the participants understood the questions clearly. The researcher emphasised important elements that needed attention.
3. Retain the same order of questioning.	The researcher retained the same order of questioning throughout the data collection process. This was also to ensure that there is standardisation and validity.

4. Include all applicable questions.	Revisions were made from the pilot test and applicable and relevant questions were posed. The pre-test was conducted with affiliated members to ensure that all questions were applicable to the study.
5. Record the participant feedback verbatim.	All participant feedback was recorded verbatim, and the researcher additionally made notes to assist with the transcription.
6. Do not answer the question on behalf of the participant.	The researcher, in all instances allowed the participant to answer questions on their own and did not interject or answer on his/her behalf. In instances where the question was misunderstood, the researcher offered a clearer explanation.
7. Pay interest in the responses but avoid indications of approval or disapproval.	A neutral stance was maintained when listening to responses from participants. The researcher observed the non-verbal cues of participants and made notes as the participants spoke.
8. Ensure that each question is understood.	To gain rich and detailed data, the researcher made sure that participants understood the questions posed.

Furthermore, the concept of triangulation was applied in this study. “Triangulation is a process of verification that increases validity by incorporating several viewpoints and methods” (Yeasmin and Rahman 2012: 156; Babbie 2013; Noble and Heale 2019). Noble and Heale (2019) add that triangulation is a technique that increases the reliability and validity of the study. Triangulation ensures that the study conducted by the researcher is believable, accurate and efficiently evaluates the research phenomenon. In this study, the triangulation technique was useful for crosschecking, providing completeness and confirmation between two or more types of research. There are many different approaches to triangulation that are available to researchers.

This study achieved triangulation by combining multiple observations, theories, methods and empirical material. Triangulation can also contribute to researchers overcoming the biases and problems that are often experienced with a single method, single observer, and single theory studies (Yeasmin and Rahman 2012; Babbie 2013; Noble and Heale 2019). In this study data triangulation was employed using three data

analysis techniques namely thematic content analysis (Facebook and Twitter), interviews and the focus group discussion. In addition, this study employed theory triangulation - the theoretical underpinning of the Uses and Gratification Theory and Systems Theory Approach was used to discuss the influence of social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter on organisational communication.

### **3.10 Delimitations/Limitations**

The sample used in the study is limited to employees at PRISA - communications and public relations practitioners that engage with social media platforms at the organisation. Due to financial constraints the organisation downsized during the study period and the researcher had to work with a smaller sample.

The researcher employed five interviews with PRISA affiliated members, and these members were based in South Africa. It is important to note that in the South African context as much as the use of social media has increased the country still lags compared to developed countries.

The social media observation is around the use and participation of PRISA employees and its affiliates that contribute to Facebook and Twitter platforms only. Therefore, the study is limited to PRISA and cannot be generalised to other organisations using social media platforms to communicate with stakeholders. It further cannot be generalised to other social media platforms.

### **3.11 Ethical consideration, anonymity and confidentiality**

All research requires the protection of research participants. This was achieved in the study through the application of appropriate ethical clearance; information detailing the research process and aims; and informed consent. The research was granted ethical clearance from the Durban University of Technology (DUT). The ethics protocol number is FREC No: /18FREC (see Annexure 2) In addition, gatekeeper's permission was received (See Annexure 4). The ethical issues of the study were addressed by gaining consent from participants. Before conducting the interviews and the focus

group, participants were issued with indemnity letters that ensured anonymity and confidentiality. The participants were informed that should they at any stage feel that they are no longer interested in participating, they would be able to withdraw from the study. Participants were granted the freedom to provide answers that are not controlled by the questionnaire, and this was achieved through open-ended questions. The information obtained during the study remained confidential and secure. Only the researcher and the supervisor of the study had access to the data obtained. To maintain the non-disclosure and confidentiality as maintained by Harding (2019), interviews and focus group discussion was transferred to the researcher's computer and assigned a password. The data will be stored for five years. Participants were informed that the information could be made available upon request. In addition, participation was not incentivised; it was purely voluntary.

### **3.12 Conclusion**

This chapter described the research methodology used in this study. It explained the research design, the population and sample size and the procedure followed in collecting of data. The researcher also described the sampling method, measuring instruments employed and the data analysis relating to the study. The chapter further addressed the concept of validity and reliability and how it contributes to ensuring that the study is valuable to organisational communication in communication and public relations organisations. The following chapter provides the analysis of the data and interpretation of the findings of the study.

# **CHAPTER 4 - DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS**

## **4.1. Introduction**

The previous chapter explained the research methodology employed in the study. It detailed the essential research procedures, the tools used to gather data, and the administering of the research instrument. This chapter presents how social media influences organisational communication and the perceptions on the use of social media by the public relations practitioners employed at PRISA and affiliated practitioners. The study further observed PRISA's social media activity on Facebook and Twitter, to obtain a practical knowledge of social media usage. This chapter implements the research design and methodology discussed in Chapter 3. It provides a summary of the analysis, presents the results, and discusses the findings of the data set.

## **4.2 Summary of the data analysis**

This study used thematic content analysis to arrange the data according to final patterns of themes. Thematic analysis is a method of identifying, offering insight into, and organising patterns of meaning (themes). Through focusing on meaning across a set of data, thematic analysis allows the researcher to create understanding and make sense of shared meanings and experiences within the context of the study. The findings of this study were deduced from Facebook and Twitter, five participants who are permanent employees at PRISA and five affiliated practitioners of PRISA. A non-probability sampling technique was used to select the participants. The researcher used interactive, open-ended questionnaire to obtain information regarding attitudes and perceptions of PRISA employees and affiliated practitioners about the use of social media. In addition, the questions focused on drawing information about the influence of social media on organisational communication and, ultimately, its role in the growth and survival of organisations. The structured interview schedule presented nine questions. The researcher transcribed the data gathered from the participants verbatim using Microsoft

(MS) Word. The transcribed data was analysed and interpreted and the researcher was able to identify the emerging themes.

Furthermore, for the focus group discussion, which consisted of fourteen questions, the first three questions used a nominal scale and focused on biographical information. The remaining eleven questions were open-ended that aimed to answer the research objectives. The data was transcribed verbatim using MS Word. The researcher employed the use of statistical software to assist with the analysis, namely: NVIVO (version 11) which assisted in the organisation and categorisation of data. The data was grouped into categories and is presented visually through graphs with a brief narrative in 4.3.1 - Section A.

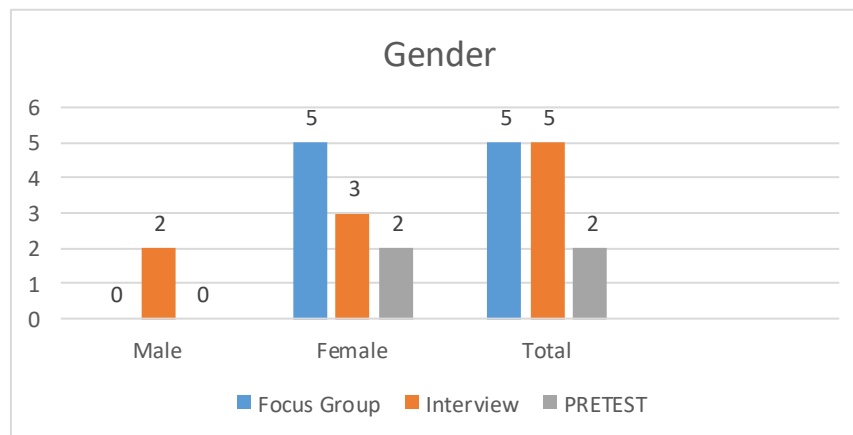
The researcher presented the results of this study in the form of graphs (Section A) and themes (4.3.2 - Section B). Subsequently, this chapter set out to answer the following objectives of the study:

- 1) To explore how PRISA uses social media to communicate with registered public relations practitioners.
- 2) To assess how PRISA has adapted to the use of social media in its organisational communication strategy.
- 3) To analyse the employees' and PRISA registered public relations practitioners' perception of social media's influence on organisational communication.
- 4) To offer an understanding on how social media can improve and maintain effective organisational communication.

This study employed specific strategies such as using open-ended questions to ensure that the main objectives were addressed through the data collection and analysis processes. Data collection techniques focussed on how social media influences organisational communication and the perception of the use of social media by the public relations practitioners employed at PRISA and affiliated members of the association. Lastly, consistency between the different data sources were explored to

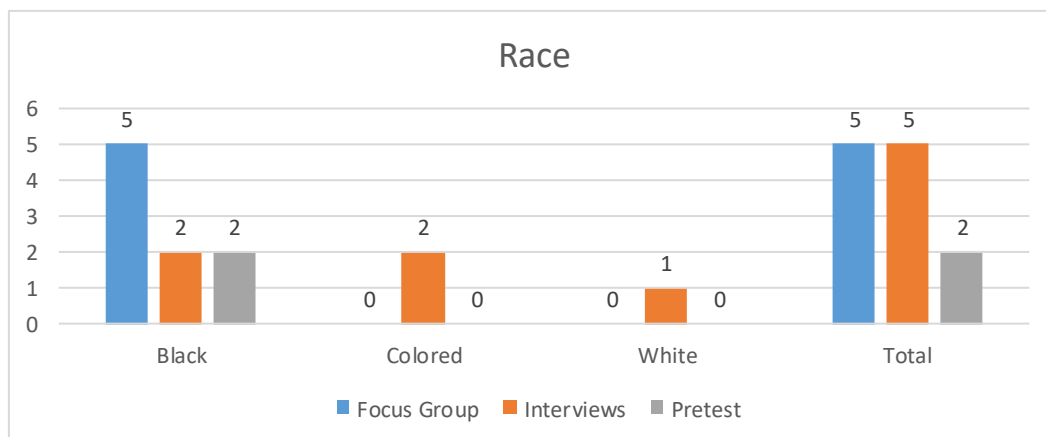


Figure 4.2 describes the gender distribution of interviewees from the one-on-one interviews, focus group discussion and the pre-test.



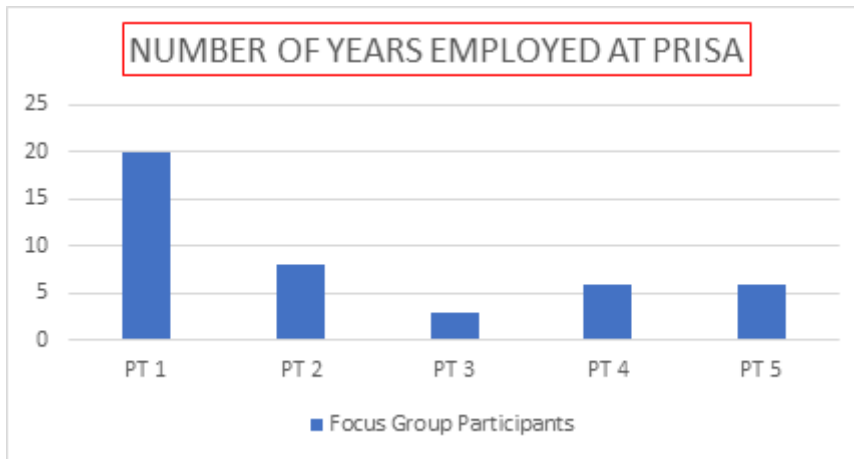
**Figure 4.2: Gender characteristics**

The ratio of males to females interviewed is 2:3. For the focus group discussion and the pre-test, all the participants were females, illustrating a 100% female participation rate.



**Figure 4.3: Race of the participants**

Nine of the participants were Black, with the lowest group being White (1). Two participants were Coloured.



**Figure 4.4: Number of years employed at PRISA**

Figure 4.4 provides the number of years individual participants (in the focus group) have been employed at PRISA. Four out of the 5 participants had at least five or more years of service at PRISA. This is valuable as it reveals that the participants have had considerable exposure to the ethos of the organisation and therefore should be knowledgeable and capable of reporting their opinions from practice and experience.

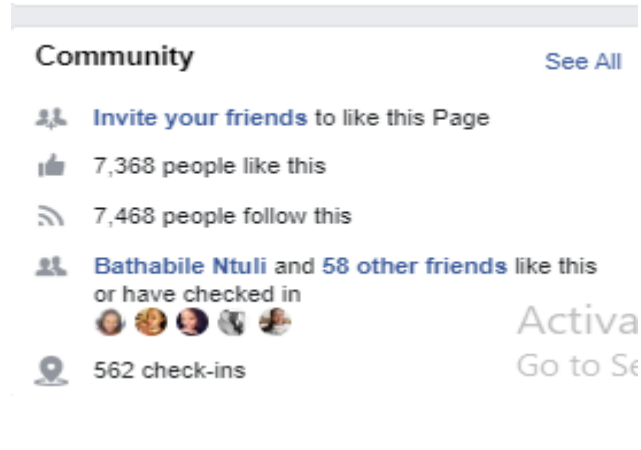


**Figure 4.5: PRISA’s Facebook page**

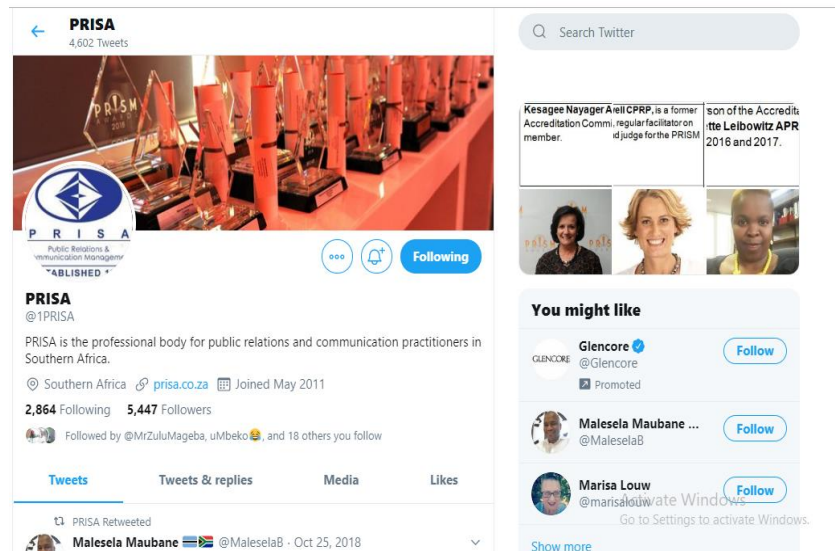
The observation of the Facebook page as shown in Figure 4.5 began on the 15<sup>th</sup> of September 2019 to the 15<sup>th</sup> of October 2019. The page is managed by Victor Sibeko

the Chief Executive Director at PRISA. The platform is mostly used to disseminate information about initiatives that PRISA embarks on.

PRISA's Facebook page has 7468 followers as per Figure 4.6 and is liked by 7468 people.

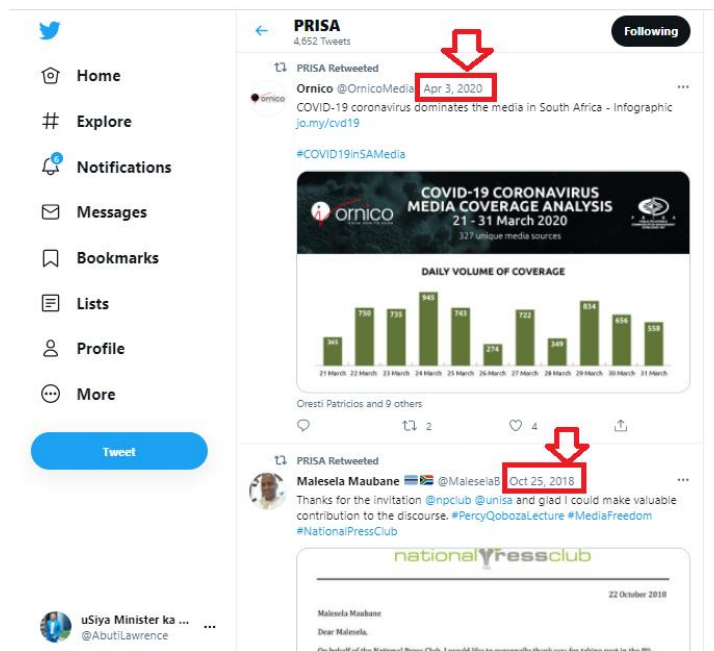


**Figure 4.6: Facebook page followers**



**Figure 4.7: PRISA's Twitter page**

PRISA has a Twitter page under the handle @1PRISA. PRISA has 5,447 followers and is following 2,864 users on their Twitter page.



**Figure 4.8: Activity on Twitter**

As indicated in Figure 4.8, there was no social media activity on PRISA’s Twitter page during the one-month social media observation.

The overview of PRISA’s Facebook and Twitter page underlines how many organisations believe that merely setting up a Facebook or Twitter page will result in increased users, improved communication, more support and an enhanced image and reputation. However, social media must become a central part of an organisation’s overall communication strategy. Unless this is considered, social media may not offer the valuable benefits in terms of contributing to an organisation’s communication efficiency.

Section A provided an overview of the biographical characteristics of the participants, an illustrative word cloud and an outline of PRISA’s Facebook and Twitter page. The following section unpacks the themes that were derived, and a detailed discussion on each theme.

### **4.3.2 SECTION B - Data analysis and discussion**

This section provides the interpretation of data collected from the data set. Thematic content analysis is adopted to group information into themes. The analysis conducted presents data from the focus group discussion, interviews, and social media observation (Facebook and Twitter). The researcher observed how the case study organisation (PRISA) used social media for one month.

The following themes were derived from the data set:

**Theme 1: Social media as an effective communication tool;**

**Theme 2: Social media's role in building organisational relationships; and**

**Theme 3: Effective organisational communication.**

It is essential to explain that although the themes are discussed separately, there are many areas in which they intersect in the discussion.

#### ***4.3.2.1 Theme 1 – Social media as an effective communication tool***

Social media communication has impacted how organisations communicate today and has led to organisations revisiting their approach of communicating with their publics or key stakeholders. Social media has introduced several communication platforms that are being used by stakeholders in their everyday lives, leading to an indirect influence on the overall organisational communication approach. Scholars have revealed that social media has proved to be fast and instant communication adapted by many people in society (Icha 2016; Matali 2018). As discussed in the literature review chapter, seminal social media researchers advocate for incorporating social media in an organisations' communication strategy for the growth and sustainability of the organisation (Argyris and Monu 2015; Cohen and Blaszczynski 2015; Davis 2018; Ju and Jia 2019).

FGR.PT1 in the focus group highlights the fast-paced growth of social media in organisations:

*“Everybody is moving fast and furious and everybody is getting with it”.*

FGR.PT1 values the immediate nature or speed of information through social media. This participant additionally reflects on the benefit it brought to her organisation:

*“If we do not move with the times, then we stick with the old ages, we have to [adapt] in order to get the young ones - the new generation.” New times is social media”.*

This participant implies that failure to adapt to the new communication method will result in the organisation lagging.



**Figure 4.9: Impact of technological disruptions on the media ecosystem**

The Facebook post in Figure 4.9 addresses the impact of technological disruptions on the media ecosystem landscape, public relations and reputation management. It relates to the study’s objective of exploring how PRISA uses social media to communicate with registered public relations practitioners; and offer an understanding of how social media can be used to improve and maintain effective organisational communication. This Facebook post encourages practitioners to find suitable ways to use social media to enhance their communication and manage the reputation of their respective organisations. This is a current and relevant topic that is beneficial to all communication and public relations practitioners. Knowledge of these discussions and debates in the

industry will contribute to building knowledge and deepening communication and dialogue among practitioners.

Social media is instant two-way communication that enables users to interact in real-time and is understood by scholars and its users to be quick and a more immediate form of modern-day communication (Icha 2016; Matali 2018). In terms of how PRISA communicates with its stakeholders, FGR.PT5 foregrounded the immediacy that comes with using social media for quick, effective communication in an organisation:

*“It made it quicker, more immediate ..... ya its present... it’s no more you waiting two or three weeks for the information to get here....ya and if something changes let’s say... a venue needs to change or something you can very quickly change and let everyone know.....[It’s] not like placing an ad in the newspaper and waiting for someone to buy the newspaper before they see your add, they see it instant[ly].*

FGR.PT1 explains:

*“it’s quick.....it’s cheap..... more effective.... and it’s not just for members it’s for the public... even those who don’t even know about PRISA... It’s for everyone to enquire.”*

Social media enables greater speed of information delivery and allows employees to save time in their duties. The immediacy of social media has come with many benefits to organisations, one of which is the ability to share information at a fast pace with audiences located in different parts of the world. Social media further allows greater access to information and enables productivity in organisations.

Findings by scholars have proved that effective communication is at the centre of all organisations (Cutlip, Center and Broom 2000; Fielding and Du-Plooy-Clliers 2014; Shonubi and Akintaro 2016; Kuruç and Opiyo 2017). Therefore, management needs to properly plan and implement an effective communication strategy (Davis 2018; Skinner *et al.* 2016; Ju and Jia 2019). Social media has influenced the way organisations plan

and execute their communication strategies. Many researchers have affirmed that it has become almost impossible for organisations to ignore social media and its opportunities for effective communication (Welch and Jackson 2007; Fielding and Du-Plooy-Cilliers 2014; Inya 2017).

Communication plays an essential part in organisations, and effective channels should be in place to guarantee a seamless process. Poor communication is therefore noted as the primary driver of negative feelings among stakeholders in an organisation. The organisations' stakeholders usually share such conversations on social media platforms and the public relations practitioner needs to ensure that they keep up with the latest trends, manage the perception of the organisation and ensure that matters are resolved timeously (Skinner, Von Esselen, Mersham and Motau 2016; Inya 2017; Kim and Scott 2019).

FGR.PT1 indicated that it is important for practitioners to keep up with the latest trends and follow stakeholders on social media.

*“We need to follow other practitioners to see what is happening and keep up with the latest trends”.*

Organisations need to be up to date with trending programmes as programmes require extensive analysis of the environment and evaluation. Effective organisational communication relies heavily on communication channels that organisations employ in their communication strategies. The perception of the communication channels used by the organisations' employees and stakeholders play a role in how the message is delivered and effectively received (Thomas and Dittman 2016). In addition, public relations practitioners are responsible for ensuring that the right content is provided to the audience to communicate key messages successfully.

Practitioners should aim to develop and adapt to communication channels that are efficient and effective. Participant PM (I1) in the structured interview expressed how feedback is valued in the work of public relations practitioners:

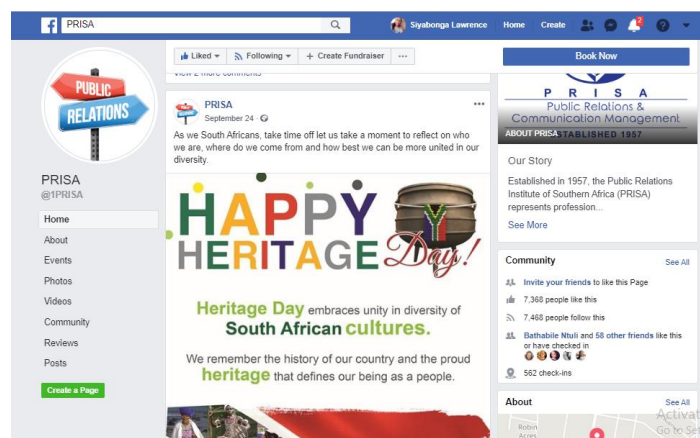
*“It is about the effectiveness of the feedback and the immediacy of getting information, because sometimes you post something on an e-mail or website and it takes time to get a response”.*

PM (I1) suggests that organisations should focus on employing a dedicated person who will communicate and almost respond immediately to the client’s challenges. This is supported by researchers who assert that diverse discussions and interactions on social media can be monitored and used for the benefit of an organisation for example to avert a crisis and respond timeously (Romenti, Murtarelli, and Valentini 2014; Canhoto and Padmanabhan 2015; Pace, Buzzanca, and Fratocchi 2016).

Participant LM (I3) further suggested:

*“PRISA should be more immediate, maybe be a conversation starter”.*

It is an essential comment as PRISA is a leading public relations professional body, expected to foster the professionalisation of public relations practice in Southern Africa. One of the ways it can effectively carry out its responsibilities is through using social media to publish fresh, current, regular, relevant information to effectively communicate with its key publics and promote best practice in the industry. PRISA can spearhead the creation of digital or online communities to discuss, debate, share ideas and experiences. This will raise the profile of PRISA, contribute to gaining support and foster a collaborative working environment.



**Figure 4.10: Heritage Day**



**Figure 4.11: Heritage Day interaction on Facebook**

The Facebook post in Figure 4.10 and Figure 4.11 on Heritage Day had 35 likes, three comments and five shares. It is evident that PRISA does not receive much attention on their Facebook page - there is minimum engagement and a lack of conversation. However, this post reiterates LM (I3) comment on PRISA's significant role in being a conversation starter in the industry. As can be seen from the comments, one of the members is commenting from Nigeria on SA's rich and long cultural history. This platform, if managed effectively, can be used as a communication tool to engage public relations practitioners in meaningful conversations across borders.

The influence of modern technology and engaging in social media have become a prominent part of modern communication. As a leading public relations professional body, with over 2500 members, PRISA should use its position to expose its members to the global best practices and engagement and interaction with top practitioners in Africa and worldwide. The social media platform can be used to foster the professionalisation of the public relations practice in Southern Africa which in turn will contribute to the growth and sustainability of organisations.

Participant AW (I5) believes that one needs to embrace technology mainly when working in a communications and networking environment.

*“We are in the fourth industrial revolution, some of us are told that we are beyond the fourth industrial revolution. We need to advance to the latest modes of communication. One has to admit that the greatest form of communication [is] happening in the modern form of communication. Communication is critical and in an environment which is ostensibly understood to be a networking environment a public relations practitioners concern is within the nature of the function.”*

Social media brings about many opportunities and advantages for users and organisations. However, participant PM (I1) explained that:

*“We need to take note that in this age, we cannot just be unwilling subjects of technology we need to engage with it critically”.*

Participant AW (I5) further explains that:

*“There are many disciplines using the social media platforms on a more consistent and structured basis...personnel should be assigned to the systematic monitoring of trends and the rapid growth of the industrial revolution”.*

These comments highlight how, if used appropriately and regularly, online platforms such as Facebook and Twitter can create and improve communication efficiency (Andriole 2010; Zheng, Martin, Brohman, and Xu 2014; Cao, Guo, Vogel and Zhang 2015). The participants imply that users cannot be static, inactive participants on social media and perhaps need to be encouraged and trained on the uses and benefits. Furthermore, participant AW (I5) offers a valuable suggestion relating to the monitoring of trends on social media. This could significantly contribute to enabling communications and public relations organisations to keep abreast of happenings in their industry and respond to changes in the environment. It further draws on the importance of an organisation functioning as an open system (Lubbe 2004; Reitz 2012; and Hiscock 2019) as unpacked in Systems Theory Approach and how users can attain satisfaction and gratification (Uses and Gratification Theory) from using social media.

The following section discusses Theme 2 and how social media can build a sense of connectedness, collaboration, engagement and dialogue among its key publics or stakeholders.

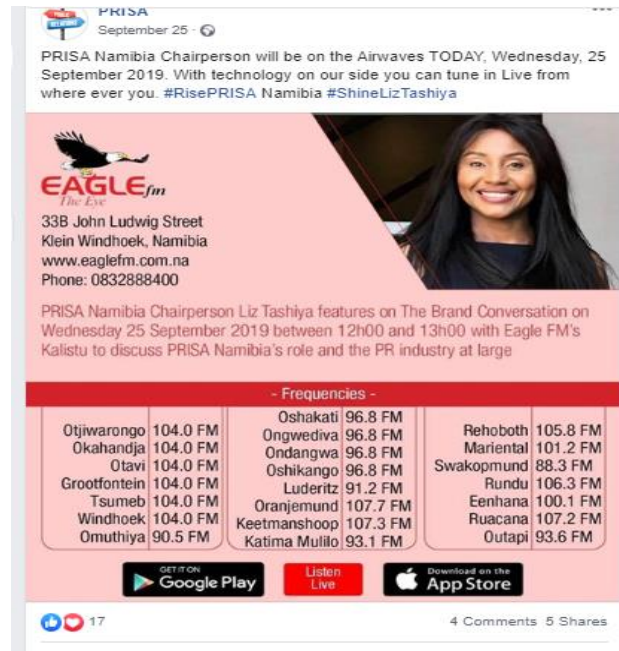
#### ***4.3.2.2 Theme 2 – Social media’s role in building organisational relationships***

Organisations use public relations practitioners to build and maintain relationships with specific audiences or key publics. Public relations refers to the manner in which organisations attempt to apply influence over the symbolic environment. As affirmed by social science researchers, public relations efforts are not about control; they focus on building and maintaining professional relationships and communication between stakeholders and the organisation (Skinner *et al.* 2016; Hiscock 2019) for mutual understanding, growth and development. It is further affirmed by Evans, Twomey and Talan (2011: 1) who maintain that the growth and speed of social media has rendered public relations “a constant dialogue between an organisation and its audience.”

The effective use of social media by PRISA will enable public relations practitioners to connect, collaborate, engage in dialogue and build and sustain relationships. Communicators of messages should keep in mind that communication is more than just transmitting information; but deals with the emotions, experiences and reactions that are equally important when trying to build continuous relationships with stakeholders (Thomas and Dittman 2016). This is relevant to this study as practitioners have the major role of reacting or responding to online content to create a responsive public relations and communications practice.

Participant PM (I1) mentions PRISA’s ability to reach large audiences through social media:

*“PRISA can reach a lot of people as they have a wide reach and can make a difference”.*



**Figure 4.12: PRISA Namibia Chairperson featuring on a radio station**

Figure 4.12 highlights PRISA's ability to use social media to expand its reach when sharing information. This post alerts users to a radio station in Botswana, where the regions chairperson was interviewed on PRISA Namibia's role and the PR industry.

The reach that PRISA has on social media is broad, due to affiliated organisations, public relations and communication practitioners who hold prominent positions in other organisations. The influence in the use of social media could have an even more significant impact on building strategic organisational relationships. PRISA is more than just an institution, but a networking institute consisting of influential practitioners across the industry. However, participant PM (I1) states that he finds PRISA's website more effective than its social media accounts. For an organisation to ultimately make use of social media in building harmonious relationships, it must ensure that it invests both time and resources on online communication. Building an online presence is essential for organisations aiming to build relationships with stakeholders who embrace online platforms. A strong online presence will work to the advantage of the organisation that utilises social media to achieve a competitive advantage and build and maintain mutually beneficial relationships. Therefore, employees, public relations and communication practitioners should aim to participate in their planned communication.

In PRISA, using its Facebook and Twitter platform could enable the sharing of ideas, exchange of experiences and connectedness and the building of healthy organisational relationships.

Participant NS (I4) noted that PRISA ought to do more in terms of using social media to develop strategic relationships with stakeholders:

*“Social media is there to grow relations between the organisation and the public. PRISA has not done that yet... They should be spearheading social media.”*

This response relates to the objective of exploring how PRISA uses social media to communicate with registered public relations practitioners and suggests that there are gaps in PRISA’s social media strategy. Participant NS (I4) proposes that PRISA has a leading role in growing relations between practitioners and employing social media to achieve this.

Literature shows that the internet has brought a new and advanced mode of communication to society (Badea 2014; Kjaerulff 2015; Duffett 2015; Irbo and Mohammed 2020). Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have not only contributed to a shift in communication, but also the way in which information is consumed, created and used to form relationships in organisations. This technological development has led to the growth and change in the practice of public relations in organisations. Participants 1, 2, 4 and 5 from the focus group discussion confirm that PRISA offers training on social media management, videography, writing in the electronic media, digital strategy and many more. PRISA provides training and education for practitioners who are already in the industry. These training workshops are not limited to practitioners who belong to PRISA, but all communication and PR practitioners in the industry. Due to the rapid growth in the information and communication sector, practitioners have no choice but to advance their skills through developmental initiatives such as those offered by PRISA. Facebook and Twitter can yield the organisation to new levels of efficiency.

The practice of public relations is based on building relationships with stakeholders and practitioners are increasingly expected to engage their publics in conversation through social media. Organisations today are required to adapt to the new way of communication. Public relations practitioners serve as the intercessor between the organisation and the stakeholders by establishing effective communication channels and implementation of activities that are directed at building a mutual and beneficial relationship between the parties. Therefore, incorporating social media into the organisation's communication strategy has become important to the survival of many organisations. Practitioners need to engage in professional development around the use and impact of social media as it has a significant influence on how information is obtained, exchanged, and ideas shared. Social media has become a core of society's communication cycle and impacts how organisations communicate with key publics (Badea 2014; Kjaerulff 2015).

Social media has impacted stakeholder engagement in several ways. Human relations rely heavily on the effective practice of communication. Therefore, it becomes increasingly challenging for organisations to survive and remain sustainable without effective communication. Recently, organisations have taken advantage of social medias' ability to communicate with external stakeholders instantly. Social media's ability to form instant interpersonal communication has progressed over the past decade, making it a relevant area to scholars (Fielding and Du-Plooy-Cilliers 2014; Skinner, Von Essen, Mersham and Motau 2016; Xie 2018). Furthermore, social media does not only allow organisations to communicate with their key stakeholders, but also offers benefits relating to knowledge sharing and trust building (Ford and Mason 2013; Tsimonis and Dimitriadis 2014; Cheng, Fu, and de Vreede 2017).

Participants 1, 4 and 5 from the focus group discussion pointed out that:

*“External stakeholders have adapted to PRISA's use of social media”.*

It has become evident that communication practitioners' adoption of social media sites has become essential to consider. People have adopted the use of social media as a way of life. An integral component of social media use in organisations is audience

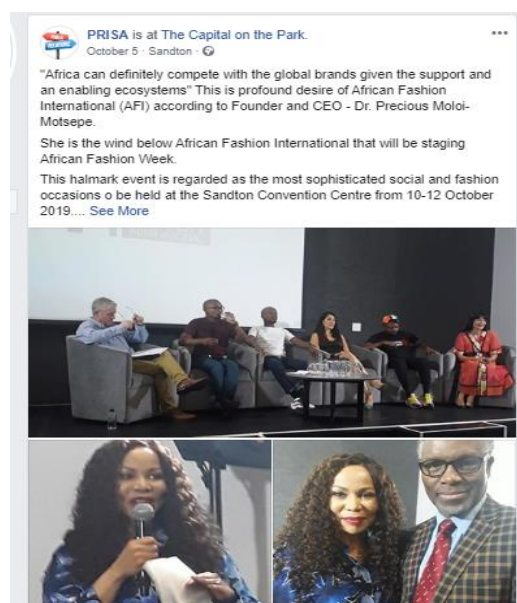
engagement. In responding to a question on external stakeholders adapting to PRISA’s use of social media, a participant from the focus group (FGR.P1) indicates that interaction on PRISA’s social media has improved.

*“PRISA has been getting a lot more views, hits and comments on Facebook and Twitter. People are interacting”.*

It relates to the objective of assessing how PRISA has adapted to the use of social media. Social media has made communication even better for practitioners. Practitioners no longer have to wait to receive feedback. It is more intimate and instant. Participant OB (I2) indicates that:

*“through the use of social media we get to know what is happening and trending”.*

PRISA should focus on ways to make use of social media to create engagement and debate around interesting topics such as social issues and aspects that affect the community. Many novice practitioners depend on PRISA’s knowledge building and training and development offerings and PRISA should in turn use this as a way of establishing rapport with these stakeholders.



**Figure 4.13: PRISA networking**



**Figure 4.14: Panel discussion**

The interaction that appears on the observation of the social media site in Figure 4.13 and Figure 4.14 highlights PRISA’s efforts to foster engagement among different industries and sectors. Figure 4.14 shows PRISA’s relationship-building strategies among key players in the sector. The sharing of these posts such as the panel discussion on “the changing media landscape” encourages practitioners to keep up to date on current affairs and trends. It is evident that PRISA is creating networking opportunities which is a key objective of the organisation.

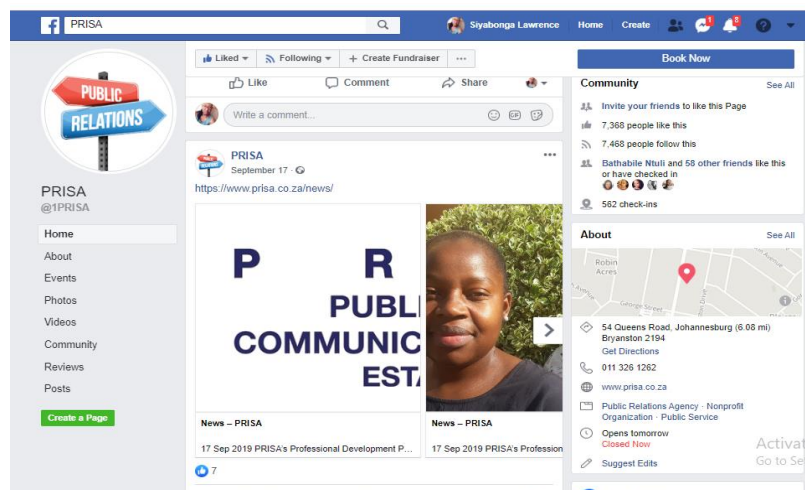
Participant SN (I4) further highlights that he believes that:

*“PRISA is not there as an institute, but they could serve as a networking platform for people in the industry”.*

In this case, it is evident from participants that engagement is important and social media has presented the ability to network and build key partnerships. Some practitioners are not convinced that PRISA makes full use of social media. Participant LM (I3) insists that she does not see PRISA striving to build relationships, but they are more focused on “*Push marketing*”.

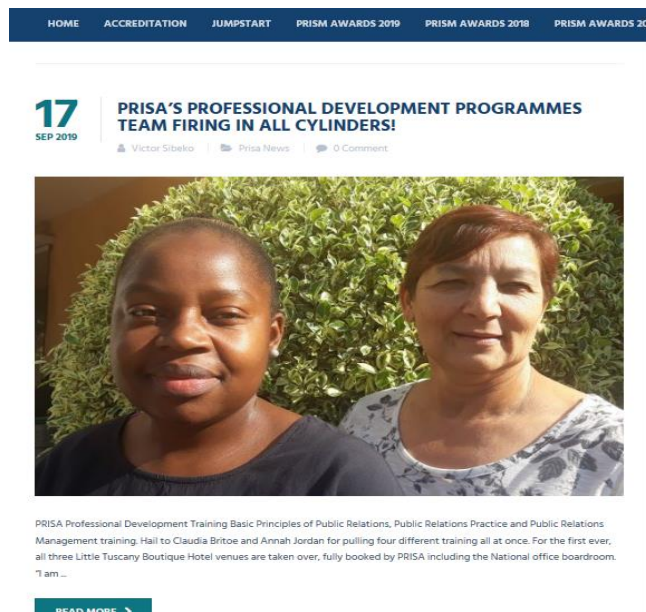
*“I feel like they are old fashioned and they not keeping up with the trend so I’m not sure from my opinion if they are actually doing what they supposed to be doing when it comes to building and maintaining relationships.”*

It is a significant contribution, as it highlights PRISA’s need to keep up to date with trends and developments in the environment, particularly for communications and public relations organisations aiming to build and maintain relationships. It further suggests that PRISA needs to review its communications strategies to remain responsive and relevant. This participant’s comment implies that more interaction, engagement, and connectedness is required by PRISA when engaging in Facebook and Twitter to meet the needs of key publics.



**Figure 4.15: Link to PRISA’s website**

As indicated in Figure 4.15 this post is focused on sharing information. However, the post directs users to PRISA’s main website where they will obtain more information. This post had seven likes and no comments or shares. The link that was provided is as follows: <https://www.prisa.co.za/news/>. The screenshot of the page which members were directed to, is indicated in Figure 4.16.



**Figure 4.16: PRISA’s Professional development programmes**

The seven likes for this post emphasise the underuse of the platform. It further raises the issues of how PRISA could attract more engagement from users. The training programmes mentioned in Figure 4.16 could be of significant value to practitioners and perhaps as suggested by LM (I3) more exciting contemporary ways of communicating its agenda should be considered. There are several methods and platforms that PRISA can use to interact with their stakeholders. However, to effectively reach their public, they need to focus on utilising platforms that their key publics use. Commenting on how the use of social media platforms has influenced organisational communication, SW (I5) explained:

*“.....there are multiplicity of platforms upon which communication should take place so I think that has influenced [PRISA] to be more innovative and more flexible in the modes of communication and more alert to the management of and control of social media as a platform of disseminating its own agenda.”*

Participant OB (I2) states that she uses Facebook to communicate with PRISA “as it is easily accessible”. It is significant because most young practitioners spend their time using social media sites in their interaction. If PRISA is focused on building continuous relations with these stakeholders, then they need to incorporate these platforms in their

communication strategy. It relates to the study's objective of assessing how PRISA has adapted to the use of social media in its organisational communication strategy. In addition, FGR.P4 notes that:

*“It is vital, particularly the younger practitioners are spending their time on Facebook and Twitter, so we have to use social media, if we don't then we go into complete oblivion”.*

Organisations need to build their online presence to engage in information exchange and promote sharing experiences and ideas. Participant SN (I4) advises that organisations need to:

*“be there, show up, and engage on social issues”.*

Participant AW (I5) expresses that:

*“There should be constant and thematic approach towards social media and other platforms like e-mails and WhatsApp groups. Organisations need to be more constant in their approach when using social media”.*

These views are affirmed by Gwaka (2015) and Cartwright, Davies and Archer-Brown (2021) who suggest that organisational steps towards building greater investment in social media will propel organisations to new levels of connectiveness, performance, competitiveness and sustainability, as social media is here to stay.

The following section provides the third and final theme garnered from the data set.

#### ***4.3.2.3 Theme 3 – Effective organisational communication***

Social media has gained significance in society today. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have contributed to a shift in communication, and how information is consumed and shared in organisations. Social science researchers maintain that social media influences how information in organisations is obtained, exchanged and how ideas are

shared and ultimately contribute to the survival of many organisations (Pace, Buzzanca and Fracocchi 2016; Skinner *et al.* 2016; Hunjet, Susec and Kozina 2017; Xie 2018). Social media has become a core of society's communication cycle and impacts how organisations communicate with their publics (Badea 2014; Kjaerulff 2015). PRISA has made use of Facebook and Twitter to communicate with their intended stakeholders. However, their approach from the data gathered in this study shows that it has been more informative, and participants exclaimed that more should be done to focus on building mutual participation and feedback for effective communication.

LM (I3) suggests:

*“PRISA should be more interactive, shoot more videos go live more.... that can touch the youth.... make short videos to be more hands on.”*

Participant OB (I2) points out:

*“Using social media to inform and not communicate as a form of engaging feedback”.*

Participant LM (I5) further advises that:

*“They can use social media to share information amongst practitioners”.*

The above participants' comments resonate with comments presented in theme 2, highlighting the need for PRISA to adapt to changes in the social media world and play a more active and visible role in reaching its key publics. Participant LM (I3) suggests making use of more interactive content to appeal to younger users. Facebook has many interactive modes that should be employed by PRISA to be more visible, and these mediums should be used to stimulate participation on social media and enhance organisational communication.

LM (I5) further advises that discussion forums will help PRISA:

*“To gain information... from like-minded practitioners and also provide networking opportunities as an information gathering practice”.*

Creating of a discussion forum could work as an advantage, as practitioners will have a platform to share best practices and challenges that they face in the industry. PRISA’s current social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) attract several practitioners and non-practitioners, business and various types of publics. These platforms could be used to their maximum to effectively reach the stakeholders and have a greater impact.

Participant NS (I4) emphasises that:

*“They could be using the communication tool to really build relationships....Social media is the way to go and they should take advantage to build relationships.”*

As indicated in the introduction of this chapter, this comment interrelates with Theme 2, highlighting the role of social media platforms in building organisational relationships.

Relating to the limitations, challenges and integration of social media for organisational communication at PRISA, FGR.P1 expressed:

*“ja and also we need to follow other practitioners to see what’s happening... we don’t always have the time to do that...”*

FGR.P4 accentuates that in a fast-paced work environment it is difficult to be responsive when one has to multi-task:

*“then sometimes you have a plan with content but something happens that you’ve got to be dealt with immediately and then you’ve got to change your plan and to always make sure its relevant and up to date.”*

This comment reiterates the need for practitioners to be trained on social media use and for organisations to have employees dedicated to social media management.

Despite the social media observation that reflected minimal use of social media by PRISA, the focus group was confident that the organisation is adjusting to the use of the platform. They bring to attention that there is now a dedicated person in charge of all the content that is posted and uploaded on the organisation's social medium platforms. FGR.P5 indicated that:

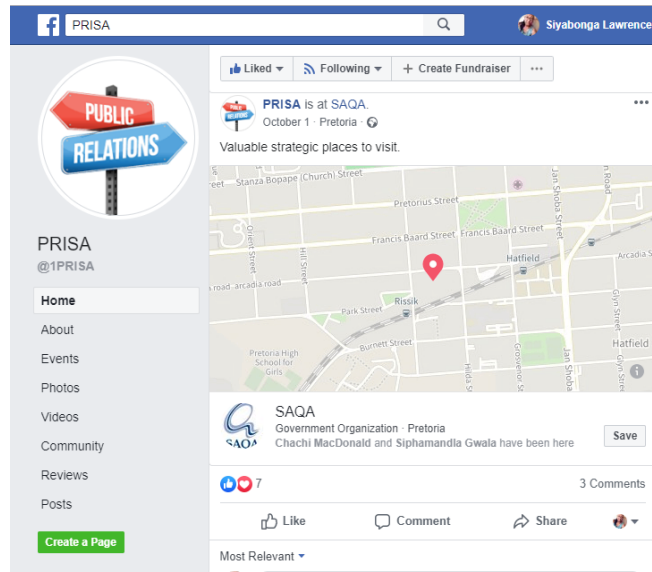
*“The CEO is responsible for all information published on PRISA's social media sites. He gets information from whichever department and uploads content”.*

The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of any organisation has a multitude of responsibilities and should have an active presence on social media, however the management of social media should be the task of a dedicated employee.

Participant AW (I5) insists that for PRISA to be more effective in their quest to operate on social media, they should focus on:

*“Writing and issuing of statements that are consistent with the press or disseminate information that ensure that participants of PRISA are well informed”.*

FGR.P1 expressed that PRISA sometimes requests delegates to produce content for their social media sites and is an approach that has proved to be effective. It is a process that has enabled delegates to provide their opinions and experiences on key issues in the field of public relations and communication and contributes to their continuous professional development (CPD). This act indirectly influences other practitioners to participate in the CPD programmes offered by PRISA. It further encourages sharing of ideas and experiences which can lead to knowledge building among practitioners.



**Figure 4.17: South African Qualification Authority**

PRISA shared a post (Figure 4.17), highlighting the South African Qualification Authority (SAQA) as a valuable place to visit. It serves as an indication to members that PRISA has a relationship with SAQA. SAQA recognises PRISA as a professional body in facilitating the necessary CPD training and skills development to its members. This post is a reminder to public relations practitioners about elevating their profession to the highest level through engaging in PRISA’s programmes in order to earn CPD points. The post generated seven likes and three comments. Yet again, the engagement on this platform is relatively low.

FGR.P1 explained that:

*“where the delegates attend those training, we ask one of them to write maybe a review of what they learnt on the training and that goes back onto social media and that’s how we also get people from other organisations coming in because they see it on social media.... it is eye opening hearing and seeing and telling each other.”*

Effective organisational communication relies largely on communication channels that organisations employ in their communication strategies. Furthermore, as discussed in previous chapters, the perception of the communication channels used by the

organisations' employees and stakeholders plays a role on how the message is delivered and effectively received. Organisational communication plays a significant role for organisations such as PRISA where their core function is to promote professional and ethical engagement.

Communication is the very foundation on which organisations are built. Effective communication is not only necessary, but also central to the success of an organisation and it is an important medium for achieving organisational goals. In responding to the advantages of incorporating social media in PRISA's communication strategy, FGR.P1 explained:

*"I would say that if we don't incorporate social media we will be called the donkey in the industry because everybody is moving fast and furious and everybody is getting with it...New times is social media."*

FGR.P4 maintained:

*"There is a broad reach..."*

FGR.P5 expressed that social media has contributed to increasing membership:

*"Another advantage is that [it] seems like we are getting more members, our rate of membership is increasing. Even the CPDs and workshops have increased as well because of social media."*

In addition to promoting effective organisational communication with external stakeholders, in any organisation, employees communicate formally and informally to achieve the objectives that are set by management. However, employees need to be motivated through continuous two-way communication. When employees have adequate resources and training, they will effectively implement the organisational communication strategy. In responding to how public relations practitioners navigate through the fast-paced environment and changing landscape of social media to improve and maintain social media usage/functions in organisations, SW (I5) explained:

*“There are many disciplines using platforms, there is a big need to evaluate and monitor and to review the social media platforms on a more consistent and structured basis.... let it be systemic, and people assigned to monitor the trends as they move so rapid in the 4<sup>th</sup> industrial revolution and alertness to technical approaches and user interfaces. There has to be consistent alignment of what PRISA desires to do going forward, with what is happening technologically and in the face of the new smart tools that are happening in media.”*

Participant SW (I5) affirms the importance of PRISA adapting to changes in the social media environment to remain relevant and responsive. SW (I5) further suggests the value of monitoring and reviewing social media platforms to ensure efficient use of social media in organisational communication.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the findings of how social media influences organisational communication and the perceptions of public relations practitioners employed at PRISA and affiliated members on the use of social media. The study’s findings indicated that social media is an aspect that has impacted the way society communicates today and how organisations communicate with their stakeholders. The majority of organisations have adopted social media in their communication strategies to maximise their reach. However, the social media observation highlighted poor level of engagement on PRISA’s social media platforms. Participants shared valuable insight on how social media allows greater access to information and enables productivity in organisations. Data also revealed that PRISA could effectively carry out its responsibilities by using social media to publish fresh, relevant information to effectively communicate with its publics and promote best practices in the industry. The data set also affirmed the value of building an online presence, creating online discussion forums to share good practice and experiences and using social media to promote training and development in the industry. The final chapter of this study provides a summary of the study, the conclusions based on the findings and offers recommendations.

# CHAPTER 5 - CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## 5.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 provided a discussion on the data collected for this research. This chapter concludes the study and provides a summary based on the findings of the study. The conclusions are derived from the research findings generated through the data set. Recommendations are offered, explained and a description of how they may be implemented in public relations and communications organisations is included.

## 5.2 Summary of the study

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of social media on organisational communication. The researcher selected the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA) as the case study in unpacking and understanding the phenomenon.

**Chapter 1** presented an introduction and background of the study. It further provided the justification for the research. It outlined the research problem and offered an understanding on how social media can contribute to improved communication efficiency in organisations.

The study's objectives were:

- To explore how PRISA uses social media to communicate with registered public relations practitioners;
- To assess how PRISA has adapted to the use of social media in its organisational communication strategy;
- To analyse the employees' and PRISA registered public relations practitioners' perception of social media's influence on organisational communication and;
- To offer an understanding of how social media can improve and maintain effective organisational communication.

**Chapter 2**, the literature review, provided an extensive review of texts around social media and organisational communication. The literature defined and outlined communication as well as organisational communication. The rise of social media in organisational communication was also foregrounded. An extensive description of social media's influence on society was covered. An overview of the case study, PRISA was offered. The study's two theoretical frameworks were discussed, the Uses and Gratification Theory and Systems Theory Approach.

**Chapter 3** provided a detailed discussion on the research design and methodology used in this study. Firstly, the nature of this study, namely the qualitative research design, interpretivist paradigm and exploratory approach were detailed to understand the influence of social media on organisational communication. Thereafter, the target population was provided followed by the discussion of the data collection methods and instruments i.e. Thematic content analysis (Facebook and Twitter), semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion to collect rich descriptive data. The process followed for the analysis of data was detailed, followed by the validity and reliability of the study, trustworthiness and limitations. Lastly, the ethical considerations were illustrated detailing how participants were informed that they had the right to privacy; anonymity and confidentiality; and a full explanation of the research was communicated.

**Chapter 4** comprised of two sections. Section A provided the biographical characteristics of the participants, an illustrative word cloud and a brief overview of PRISA's Facebook and Twitter page. Section B offered a detailed analysis of data obtained under three themes, namely: Social media as an effective communication tool; Social media's role in building organisational relationships; and Effective organisational communication.

### **5.3 Conclusions and achievement of the objectives of the study**

The aim of the study was to investigate the influence of social media on organisational communication. The study took on a case study approach where PRISA was used to understand the phenomenon. The study aimed to analyse the influence of social media

on organisational communication by exploring PRISA's internal and external publics' perception of the impact of social media on organisational communication. The study focused on demonstrating understanding on the importance of social media and how public relations practitioners can use social media to better and or advance their communication with publics.

### **5.3.1 Objective one sought to explore how PRISA used social media to communicate with their registered public relations practitioners**

The study provided a description of the role and function of PRISA in the public relations and communications industry. The data set presented findings on how the institute used social media in the attempt to communicate with its external stakeholders. Participants maintained that PRISA needed to be more constant in their approach to social media. Some commented that as a communications organisation more interaction, engagement, and connectedness is required by PRISA when engaging in Facebook and Twitter to meet the needs of key publics. It was evident that there is a poor level of engagement by PRISA on social media.

One of the core roles of PRISA is to attract membership and gain support in its programmes. One of the ways that PRISA uses social media is when informing practitioners about CPD programmes offered. CPD cultivates professional competencies and are imperative for survival in a dynamic and turbulent environment. Participants maintained that CPD programmes offered by PRISA further encourages sharing of ideas and experiences which can lead to knowledge building among practitioners. PRISA can make use of these collaborative online platforms to deliver continuous development programmes for remote practitioners. As was indicated in the literature, PRISA represents practitioners across the Southern African region.

Employees at PRISA perceived social media to be instant, cheap and fast in its delivery of content to stakeholders. The speed of information between organisations was recognised by participants as being valuable in their field of work as it enables a responsive practice. Participants expressed the importance of engaging with social media critically and highlighted that users cannot be static, inactive participants on

social media platforms. Participants affirmed that social media is an indispensable part of life and many expressed the value of ‘moving with the times’ in this fast-paced ICT era.

### **5.3.2 Objective two sought to assess how PRISA had adapted to the use of social media in its organisational communication strategy**

The study provided a comprehensive analysis of the use of social media in organisational communication and focused on the importance of incorporating social media in an organisation’s communication strategy. The data set indicated a minimal incorporation of social media in PRISA’s organisational communication strategy. It was evident that PRISA has been slow in its approach to integrate social media in its organisational strategy. The underuse of Twitter and Facebook and the absence of a social media policy verifies this. This was highlighted by the lack of the engagement on these platforms during the study period.

Participants acknowledged that one of the ways it can effectively carry out its responsibilities is through using social media to publish fresh, current, regular, relevant information to effectively communicate with its key publics and promote best practice in the industry. Participants expressed that PRISA could become an online ‘conversation starter’ or create digital communities in the industry where key societal issues could be discussed. Some participants provided further suggestions on how PRISA could best utilise social media in their organisational communication strategy, and these will be unpacked in the recommendations section.

### **5.3.3 Objective three sought to analyse the employees’ and PRISA registered public relations practitioners’ perception on how social media influences organisational communication**

The literature outlined the influence and impact that social media has on organisational communication. The data set provided participants perception on how social media influences organisational communication. The results of the analysis indicate that all practitioners believe that social media has an influence on society and ultimately

organisational communication. Participants maintained that social media fosters greater access to information and enables productivity in organisations. Furthermore, it was evident that social media could be used to manage reputational issues that may arise on social media, to build relationships, share ideas and experiences and promote conversation and interaction among practitioners.

Participants expressed the imperative role of PRP's who serve as the intermediary between the organisation and the stakeholders by establishing effective communication channels. They maintain that it is vital to implement activities aimed at building mutual and beneficial relationships.

Furthermore, the focus group participants affirmed that the use of social media attracts the younger practitioners, and this is an area that has huge potential for PRISA and other organisations. Younger practitioners felt that PRISA needed to do more to engage with the new generation of practitioners and users.

#### **5.3.4 Objective four sought to demonstrate an understanding of how social media could be used to improve and maintain effective organisational communication**

The literature review chapter provided an outline on how PRISA operates as an open system. The literature further applied the uses and gratification theory to social media to demonstrate understanding of why users on social media engage with the web 2.0. Furthermore, the focus group discussion and structured interviews offered suggestions on how social media could be used to improve organisational communication.

The effective use of social media by PRISA will enable public relations practitioners to connect, collaborate, engage in dialogue and build and sustain relationships. Using its Facebook and Twitter platform could enable the sharing of ideas, exchange of mutual experiences and connectedness and building of healthy organisational relationships.

Participants proposed that social media enables an organisation to communicate with stakeholders and allows for knowledge sharing and fostering relationships with different industries.

Participants also suggested a review and monitoring of PRISA's communications strategies to remain responsive and relevant in the industry.

## **5.4 Recommendations**

The study provided detailed analysis and discussion on the findings of the influence of social media on organisational communication. Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

### **5.4.1 Building an online presence**

The study revealed that social media impacts and influences how organisations communicate with their stakeholders today. Organisations need to invest time and resources to build an online presence. PRISA has a wide reach locally, in Africa and globally and effectively using its online platforms will enable communications and public relations practitioners to learn from each other, network and become more confident in using social media platforms. This will foster improved organisational communication in organisations such as PRISA. One of the ways that PRISA can engage more actively is to shoot more videos; post more regularly, respond to user comments and share success stories.

### **5.4.2 Sustained and constant social media approaches**

The study indicated that society has adopted social media in professional and social settings. Organisations should use social media to be more responsive, address concerns, provide input on societal matters, and develop deliberate, continuous and sustained relationships with key stakeholders. PRISA needs to be proactive in its social media approach and take a lead in using social media for improved organisational communication.

### **5.4.3 Social media discussion forums to facilitate dialogical communication**

PRISA, through using social media such as Facebook and Twitter can take on the role of a 'conversation starter' in the industry. This will not only raise the profile of PRISA but will also provide networking and collaborating opportunities for practitioners in the industry. Social media discussion forums will enable public relations practitioners to

connect, collaborate, engage in dialogue and build and sustain relationships. Creating online discussion forums could foster the sharing of best practices, mutual experiences and challenges that practitioners face in the industry.

#### **5.4.4 Research target audience**

The study revealed that not all stakeholders are reachable through social media. An integrative organisational communication strategy, which includes both traditional mass media and new media, should be considered. The study revealed that users of social media platform gratify specific needs at a specific time. When incorporating social media in organisational communication strategies, practitioners need to ensure that the target market is reachable through the medium. Research into the demographics of external stakeholders such as age, literacy skills, and access to ICT should be considered particularly in developing economies. PRISA needs to research ways in which to engage and connect using multiple interactive conduits.

#### **5.4.5 Younger generation PRPs to spearhead social meeting activity**

The younger generation of practitioners should be encouraged to spearhead social media initiatives as this will ensure that the needs of younger publics are met. These practitioners can be tasked with developing innovative ways to augment engagement on social media.

#### **5.4.6 Staff dedicated to social media management**

The study revealed that for many years PRISA did not have a dedicated staff member to deal with social media. This delayed active engagement with external users. PRISA should therefore consider appointing an employee or team of employees who will be dedicated to social media management. This will contribute to reputation management and attracting membership and gaining support.

#### **5.4.7 Social media policy**

The development of a social media policy must be implemented. This will provide a structured guideline when incorporating social media into their organisational communication strategy. Social media policies are essential in shaping employees' expectations and developing a shared understanding of social media possibilities. The

development of the policy could be initiated by the staff member dedicated to social media management.

#### **5.4.8 Social media monitoring and review**

A social media review is important for any organisation, regardless of the level of social media engagement. The monitoring of social media is an essential part of any social media strategy and will enable PRISA to be proactive and listen to what users are saying and to use it as an opportunity for faster response times, to avert possible crisis, receive feedback and to build mutual relationships. In addition, PRISA should be aware of what is trending daily, and a social media monitoring tool can assist in tracking what is relevant and keep up with the social media timeline.

#### **5.4.9 Training and development of staff**

PRISA is in the business of training practitioners on how to be effective, responsible, accountable and professional. In addition, the study indicates that PRISA functions as an open system. When incorporating social media into the organisational communication strategy, all departments or stakeholders should be consulted. Staff need to be encouraged and trained on the uses and benefits of social media to develop their understanding of the value of social media and to build their confidence in using the platforms.

### **5.5 CONCLUSION**

Communication is the tool in which organisations use to foster and maintain relationships with their key publics or stakeholders. Communication and public relations practitioners need to establish distinct communication channels to create communication efficiency in their organisations. It is important to understand that communication keeps organisations together and can contribute to raising the profile of the organisation. The phenomenon of social media continues to expand and infiltrate society and has influenced almost all aspects of human life. Social media has found its way in the lives of people and organisations across the globe, making it almost impossible for organisations to ignore when creating their communication strategies. There are huge opportunities for organisations to embrace the shift to digital media.

Scholars argue that social media presents organisations with many advantages which should serve as a motivation to use of social media to engage with their publics and build mutually beneficial relationships. It is therefore imperative that organisations such as PRISA build an online presence to propel it to new levels of connectiveness, collaboration and performance. Social media's participatory mode of communication requires a high level of responsiveness. Effective use of social media can build knowledge in the field, facilitate online dialogical communication, attract membership and gain support. Public relations and communications organisations need to implement social media effectively to be visible and promote their work. Likewise, PRISA, as an organisation that focuses on professional development of practitioners can use social media to strategically improve its communication.

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# Annexure 1: Letter of Information



## Letter of Information

### **Title of the research study:**

The influence of social media on organisational communication: A Case Study of the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA)

**Principal Investigator/s:** Mr Siyabonga Lawrence Mzizi

**Co-Investigator/s/Supervisor/s:** Dr Nereshnee Govender

### **Brief introduction and Purpose of the study:**

This study focuses on the influence of social media on organisational communication and explores how employees as well as PR Practitioners that are registered with PRISA use social media to effectively communicate. A qualitative research methodology will be used to assess employees' and PR Practitioners' perception of the use of social media. This study will offer an understanding of how social media may contribute to improved organisational communication by assessing opportunities, threats and weaknesses relating to the use of social media by organisations. Badea (2014: 1) indicates that currently, social media has huge influence on how information in organisations is obtained, exchanged and ideas shared. It has become a core of society's communication cycle and has an impact on the manner in which organisations communicate with their internal and external stakeholders. Kjaerulff (2015: 2) indicates that in today's era of social media communication, organisations face new challenges, as the participatory modes of communication shared by social media require a high level of responsiveness. Due to the rapid increase in the use of social media among consumers, it is important for public relations practitioners to incorporate social media in their integrated organisational strategies. Organisations need to develop new approaches for organisational communication due to rapidly evolving social media (Badea 2014: 1). This research will provide insight of how social media is used to communicate with external stakeholders and assess the impact of social media on organisational communication. This study will further provide an understanding of PRISA employees' perception on the use of social media.

### **Outline of the Research procedures:**

The researcher will collect data from the employees at the PRISA head office which is in Randburg, Johannesburg as well as three Public Relations Practitioners that are registered and accredited with PRISA. Semi-structured interview schedules will be used to conduct face-to-face interviews with PRISA affiliated Public Relations practitioners. Predominantly open-ended questions will be used.

Focus group discussions will be conducted with public relations and communication staff that are directly involved with social media content. A semi-structured interview schedule will be designed to conduct three focus group discussions with 6-10 staff members. Content analysis of PRISA's current social media platforms, namely Facebook and Twitter will be conducted. The analysis will also include PRISA's communication and social media policies to assess the extent to which these policies contribute to underlying perceptions on social media's influence on organisational communication.

**Risks and Discomforts to the participants:**

There will be no risks and discomforts to the participants in the study.

**Benefits:** The study will offer insight to organisations on how to navigate through the fast paced and changing landscape of social media and to improve and maintain social media functions strategically within their organisations. It will further offer understanding of how managers can improve their communications with both internal and external stakeholders and obtain feedback effectively through social media.

**Remuneration:**

There will be no remuneration offered to the participants in the study.

**Cost of the study:** The participants will not be expected to cover any costs towards the study.

**Confidentiality:**

The participants will be informed of the confidentiality of their participation in the research process as a cardinal condition premised on ethical considerations. The information obtained during this study will remain confidential and secure and the participants will be protected by the researcher's ethical commitment as stated above. Only the researcher and the supervisor of the study will have access to the data obtained. The information can be made available upon participants' request. Should the participants feel that they want to withdraw from the study, they are welcome to do so.

**Research Related injury:** By its nature, this research will not expose participant to any form of harm or undue injurious situations. The researcher will thus take all due precaution necessary to ensure that the process takes place in a safe and injury free environment.

**Persons to contact in relations to any queries:**

The supervisor for this research is Dr. Nereshnee Govender. Please contact the supervisor on 031 373 6701 or the Institutional Research Ethics administrator on 031 373 2900.

## Annexure 2: Gatekeeper's Permission



### Annexure 2

Siyabonga Lawrence Mzizi  
Masters' in Public Relations Management  
Durban University of Technology  
E-mail: bobomzizi@gmail.com

14 August 2017

Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA)  
54 Queens Road, Bryanston, Sandton  
Johannesburg, South Africa  
2191

#### **RE: GATEKEEPER'S PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT PRISA**

I am a Masters student at the Durban University of Technology and a registered associate member of the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (Member number: 65010). I hereby request your assistance in conducting a study in fulfillment to meet the requirements of the Master of Management Science: Public Relations Management, in the faculty of Management Science at the Durban University of Technology.

The study seeks to obtain opinion and understand the perceptions of PRISA employees and registered Public Relations Practitioners on the use of Social Media. The sample (Participants) in question are the employees at the PRISA head office in Bryanston, Johannesburg as well as PR Practitioners that are registered with PRISA.

This study focuses on the influence of social media on organisational communication and how PR Practitioners use social media to effectively communicate with stakeholders. A qualitative research methodology will be used to assess internal and external publics' perception of the use of social media. The researcher will collect data from the employees who are employed at the PRISA head office. Semi-structured interview schedules will be used to conduct face-to-face interviews.

The face-to-face interviews will be conducted with registered Public Relations Practitioners and Focus Group Discussions will be conducted with staff members from the marketing and communications team at the PRISA head office. A semi-structured interview schedule will be used to conduct three focus group discussions with 6-10 staff members. Content analysis of PRISA's current social media platforms, specifically Facebook, Twitter, the communication policy as well as the social media policy will also be conducted.

This study will offer an understanding of how social media may contribute to improved organisational communication by assessing opportunities, threats and weaknesses relating to the use of social media in organisations.

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Researcher: Siyabonga Lawrence Mzizi: bobomzizi@gmail.com/ 062 209 3190

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**The Influence of Social Media on Organisational Communication:  
A case study of the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa**

It will further offer insight to organisations on how to navigate through the fast paced and changing landscape of social media and to improve and maintain social media functions strategically within organisations.

Thank you in advance and I look forward to a positive response.

Yours Sincerely,

PRISA Signature

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**Siyabonga Lawrence Mzizi (Mr)**

---

**Victor Sibeko (Mr) - CEO**

## Annexure 3: Consent Letter



Faculty of Management Sciences  
Department of Public Relations Management  
Durban University of Technology

Date:

Dear Participant,

I am a Master's student in the Department of Public Relations Management and I am currently conducting research on the "The influence of social media on organisational communication: A Case Study of the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa." I kindly request your co-operation and participation in this study. Kindly provide me with your time by engaging me in these interview questions attached; it will serve as vital information for my research. The attached interview and/ or focus group discussion will take approximately 30-60 minutes. Participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving reasons, and without prejudice or any adverse consequences. The information you provide will only be used for research purposes. Your identity and individual answers will be kept confidential. Should you wish to discuss this further please feel free to contact me.

Thanking you in advance for your participation and cooperation.

---

Siyabonga Lawrence Mzizi (Mr)  
Tel: 061 228 3497  
Email: [bobomzizi@gmail.com](mailto:bobomzizi@gmail.com)

---

*Please complete the following as confirmation of your willingness to participate in this research study:*

*I, ....., have adequately discussed the study with the researcher, understand that I may withdraw from it at any time without giving reasons, and voluntarily agree to participate by completing the attached questionnaire or participating in the focus group discussion.*

Signature: .....

Date: .....

## Annexure 4: FREC Approval



### MANAGEMENT SCIENCES: FACULTY RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (FREC)

8 November 2018

Student No: 21649289

FREC No: /18FREC

Dear Mr SL Msizi

#### MASTERS MANAGEMENT SCIENCES (PUBLIC RELATIONS)

**TITLE: THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON ORGANISATIONAL COMMUNICATION: A CASE STUDY OF THE PUBLIC RELATIONS INSTITUTE OF SOUTHERN AFRICA**

Please be advised that the FREC Committee has reviewed your proposal and the following decision was made: **Ethical Level 2**

**Date of FRC Approval: 10 October 2018**

Approval has been granted for a period of two years, after which you are required to apply for safety monitoring and annual recertification. Please use the form located at the Faculty. This form must be submitted to the FREC at least 3 months before the ethics approval for the study expires.

Any adverse events [serious or minor] which occur in connection with this study and/or which may alter its ethical consideration must be reported to the FREC according to the FREC SOP's.

Please note that ANY amendments in the approved proposal require the approval of the FREC as outlined in the FREC SOP's.

Yours Sincerely

Prof JP Govender

Deputy Chairperson: FREC

# Annexure 5: Research Instrument – Focus Group

## Discussion

*Title: The influence of social media on organisational communication: A Case Study of the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa*

(Please tick the appropriate box)

1. Gender

Male	<input type="checkbox"/>	Female	<input type="checkbox"/>
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2. Race

Black	<input type="checkbox"/>	Coloured	<input type="checkbox"/>	Indian	<input type="checkbox"/>	White	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other	<input type="checkbox"/>
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3. How many years have you been working for PRISA?

1-3	<input type="checkbox"/>	4-6	<input type="checkbox"/>	7-10	<input type="checkbox"/>	11 >	<input type="checkbox"/>
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4. The growth of social media has changed the practice of public relations and has created a platform for Public Relations Practitioners to interact with stakeholders. In your view, what is the role of social media (Facebook and Twitter) in building relationships among PRISA stakeholders? Explain.
5. In what way has the integration of social media changed the way PRISA communicates with its stakeholders?
6. What measures does PRISA have in place to ensure that it keeps up to date with the constant changes and growth in social media technology?

7. An important component of social media use in organisations is audience engagement. In your view, have external stakeholders adapted to PRISA's use of social media? Explain.
8. Do you believe that social media platforms used by PRISA effectively gets the messages across to its audience? Please motivate.
9. Content is an important part of social media and publishing fresh, regular, relevant information is essential for effective communication. Can you explain the process of content selection and publishing on Facebook and Twitter?
10. There are many skills required to drive successful social media sites. Does PRISA provide education and training on social media? If so, describe the training provided.
11. What are the benefits of social media as a tool for organisational communication?
12. What are the limitations of social media as a tool for organisational communication?
13. Have you faced any challenges relating to the integration of social media platforms at PRISA?
14. Communication is the very foundation on which organisations are built and effective communication is not only necessary, but also central to the success of an organisation, and it is an important tool for achieving organisational goals. In your opinion, what are the advantages of incorporating social media in PRISA's communication strategy?

## **Annexure 6: Research Instrument - Interviews**

*Title: The influence of social media on organisational communication: A Case Study of the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa*

1. The growth of social media has changed the practice of public relations and has created a platform for Public Relations Practitioners to grow their networks and improve communication. In your view, what is the role of PRISA's social media platforms specifically Facebook and Twitter in building and maintaining relationships? Explain.
2. Communication is the very foundation on which organisations are built. Do you think that social media is an effective and useful communication tool when communicating with PRISA? Motivate
3. How has the use of PRISA's social media platforms influenced organisational communication? Explain.
4. What specific areas of PRISA's social media sites do you use and why? Explain
5. What are the benefits of using PRISA's social media platforms? Explain.
6. What are some of the difficulties or challenges that you currently experience in making use of social media when communicating with PRISA? Explain.
7. Do you believe that the social media platforms used by PRISA effectively meets your needs as a registered practitioner? Explain.
8. How can PRISA improve on the use of social media to effectively communicate with its stakeholders? Explain.
9. How can public relations practitioners navigate through the fast paced and changing landscape of social media to improve and maintain social media functions strategically within their organisations? Explain

## **Annexure 7: Turnitin Report**

# The Influence of social media on organisational communication: A case study of the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa

*by Siyabonga Mzizi*

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**Submission date:** 10-Jun-2021 06:25PM (UTC+0200)

**Submission ID:** 1604161069

**File name:** Siyabonga\_L\_Mzizi\_-TURNITIN\_10JUNE2021\_NG.doc (5.6M)

**Word count:** 26013

**Character count:** 151606

# The Influence of social media on organisational communication: A case study of the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa

## ORIGINALITY REPORT

<b>11</b> %	<b>9</b> %	<b>4</b> %	<b>3</b> %
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<b>8</b>	<b>Zane Davids, Irwin Brown. "The collective storytelling organisational framework for</b>	<b>&lt;1</b> %

## Annexure 8: Editing Certificate

# Triedstone Consulting RC: 2020/429060/07

Proofreading, copyediting, market research, survey, digital marketing

11 June 2021

Mr Siyabonga Mzizi  
C/o Dr Nereshnee Govender

## Editing Certificate

We certify that the manuscript titled: *the influence of social media on organisational communication, with the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA) as the case study*, was proofread and edited for grammar, spelling, punctuation and overall style. The editors ensured there were no alterations to the author's original intended meanings during the review. The editors tracked all recommendations and amendments with the Microsoft Word "Track Changes" feature. Therefore, the author had the option to accept or reject each change.

Thank you for the opportunity.

Sincerely,

**Joseph Olusegun Adebayo, PhD.**